Impermanence and the Immediacy of Now

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 57:05

This practice, Vipassana meditation—the most common translation of Vipassana is insight—is called insight practice. I thought I might talk about one of the main insights that the Buddha mentions, one that arises from this practice. But first, what do we mean by insight?

Have you had any yet? Are you going to have any? How does this drudging up and down—lifting, moving, placing—have anything to do with insight?

All we mean by insight is really simply a shift of perception. We see, we recognize—I'm using "see" metaphorically for intuitive knowing, not necessarily visual seeing—we recognize an aspect of our experience, of our mind, of our body, of the way the world is. We recognize it differently from the normal way we go about, often without even consciously realizing it, interpreting ourselves and life.

In terms of insights that come in practice, it's not that if we practice hard enough, we'll be born into a different and better reality. This is it. This is the reality. We wake up from one interpretation into another, but the reality—as I said last time—the Buddha's awakening didn't transport him to another earth on another plane. He still had to walk barefoot around India, and that's just how it was.

So the insight is a simple shift of perception. But that's huge, because when we're not recognizing an experience accurately, the way we respond, the way we interpret, the way we act in relationship to that doesn't jibe. We don't have accurate information. What shifts when we recognize accurately is that our patterns—what I mentioned last time about trying to make ourselves happy and it doesn't work because we don't have the right information—those patterns change, not out of willpower, but just because it's so obvious. The main one of those patterns is clinging, of course. But when we recognize with wisdom, we see more accurately. The wisdom is the recognition, the knowing of that. And even though the old way of seeing comes back again, there's been a change, a shift in the mind stream. We know it's not only this way.

It's like those magic eye design graphics. They used to have whole books of them—just graphics of two different colors with no conceptual picture you could recognize. But if you look at them long enough with an unfocused, relaxed gaze, a 3D image springs out of it. Hockey players, or basketball players, or something like that. Then when you start staring again, or you look away and look back, it's gone. You just have the little yellow and blue graphics. But once you know that's there, something switches. You know it. Whereas someone who's never been able to see it—you can tell them about it, and they're like, "Yeah, right, sure."

My mother could never see them, and it would make her nuts. We'd go in malls—this was when they were

really popular—and there'd be giant posters, and she couldn't stop looking. She'd be going nuts, and I'd say, "Don't you see the dinosaurs?" "No, I don't see the dinosaurs." Telling someone doesn't help, but you can help someone learn how to look. That's what we're doing here.

Once you know, once you've seen it—say, a flying saucer—if someone comes up and says, "No, you didn't," well, if you're clear in your knowing, if you have confidence in your understanding, he can say whatever he wants. You know you saw it. That's the shift. And we can respond differently. Really, that's all insight is. Then it shifts back, and we're moving between the two different ways of perceiving. This doesn't have to be a problem at all.

One of the most central insights that the Buddha speaks of—actually, perceptions—is that of impermanence. Anicca in the Pali: the changing, impermanent nature of all experience. All mental, all physical experience. That's the catch there—all experience. The misperception we have is that we perceive the permanent in what is not permanent, and we don't realize that's happening.

This is from the Sutta, from the Buddha. These are two different suttas where he's talking to his monks. He says, "There is no form"—meaning no matter, no solidity, our bodies, any other form. There's no form, there's no feeling tone—which is like the pleasant, unpleasant, neutral feeling tone. There's no perception. Perception is simply the recognition of experience, the naming, the labeling. There are no formations of mind, volitional formations, moods, thoughts, and no consciousness that is permanent, stable, eternal, not subject to change, and that will remain the same just like eternity itself.

And then the Buddha took up a little bit of soil under his fingernail. He's outside. He just took up this little bit of soil and he said, "There's not even this much form, consciousness, volitional formations, perception, feeling tone that is stable, permanent, unchanging. Not even this much." He said, "If there was this much, even this much that was stable, that didn't change, that was absolutely permanent, then this living of the holy life for the complete destruction of suffering could not be discerned. But because there is not even this much that is permanent, that is stable, then the living of this holy life for the complete destruction of suffering is discerned, is possible."

I find that a radical statement. Not even this much. Are we comfortable with that? Does the heart leap up and say, "Yeah, great!"?

The other quotation—I mean, there are millions of quotations throughout the suttas about impermanence—but again the Buddha is saying, "Bhikkhus, when the perception of impermanence is developed and cultivated..." So it's part of our practice, actually, consciously recognizing the perception of impermanence. It eliminates all sensual lust. It eliminates all ignorance. It uproots all conceit "I am." Those are code words for complete liberation in the way the Buddha spoke. So when the perception of impermanence is developed and cultivated, it basically completely liberates our heart and mind from confusion, from suffering. It leads to that depth of wisdom, of understanding, based on simply the clear recognition of how things are.

Of course, developing and cultivating that perception—that's what we're doing in the practice, and I'll point to that a bit more later in the talk, hopefully. But first I want to bring up some questions. Why is it, or should it be, so difficult to truly know, to truly perceive, to live with a cellular understanding of impermanence?

Because of all the different perceptions, the different insights that the Buddha speaks about—the others being the unreliability of all experience and the non-self nature of all—impermanence seems to me intellectually and conceptually the most accessible. I mean, when we talk about things changing, nothing really staying the same, can you sort of agree with that? We go, "Yeah, yeah, things change." On some intellectual level, that's not incredibly abstruse. We all intellectually know that our bodies are very different now from how they were twenty years ago.

But then aren't we still shocked? Shocked! When we look in the mirror in the morning and there's more gray hair, or the cellulite starts to come, or somehow—how did I get to look like this? Or we see a picture of ourselves from twenty years ago. Oh my God. Or a picture of you and all your friends from twenty years ago. I tell you, actually, it's more shocking with the friends because we think, "I didn't change as much as they did." Well, they can say the same thing, so that makes it even.

But why is it so shocking? Every moment is changing. Yet this sense of what I would call the denial of impermanence—or what the Buddha calls the upside-down perception, perceiving the permanent in what is not permanent—is so... well, it's comfortable. It's what we're used to. There are lots of reasons of habit why we don't tend to really let in, on a moment-by-moment, cellular level as opposed to just the thinking level, the fact of change.

One question I used to ask myself—well, sometimes I still do—is: Do I really know that everything, not even this much, is not stable, that everything is changing? What would it mean in my life if I really lived in and from that knowing? What would it mean? And the mind that isn't there but is thinking about what that would mean can come up with something that usually isn't the most cheery and pleasant thing. It's like, "Oh my God, everything's changing." I know that's the first noble truth—that when we're born we're going to be separated from what we love, that we're going to have sickness, old age, and death, that nothing lasts. I know that. But thinking about every minute opening to loss—that's sort of the first thing that comes up in my mind.

That's too much. Loss is too painful. And so I think that's one of the first resistances. And a lot of this is actually not so conscious—this fear of the sadness, the pain, the grief of loss.

And of course, this is where we'll be going with it: the reason there's pain and grief and this real struggle with loss is actually because we've already related to experience in a way that is not consistent with what's true. We really, really suffer when what we want or like or are comfortable with goes away. We really suffer only when we've been clinging to it, when we've been in some way relying on holding on to that experience, that person, that job, that feeling.

In some way, and often it's below the level of conscious thought, we're relying on that for confirmation, for self-confirmation, for a sense of comfort, for pleasant feeling. And that's actually huge—that we're holding on and relying on stuff for pleasant feeling. For a sense of safety, for a sense of control. We like to know how things are and get them all nice and tidy and then have them stay that way.

Like Guy's example last night of how upset his mind got when he had to walk in a different place. He's not just a weird person, you know. Well, maybe he is, but that's another thing. But every time you came into the hall, it was a free-for-all. You don't get to hold on to which seat you sit in. Every time you come in, you just have to take what seat's there. Now, in terms of our life, that's not really a big deal, is it? But wouldn't it be a little distressing, a little upsetting? You come in and it's bad enough in the lunchroom, you know, and that's enough of a nightmare. But if we did that everywhere? What if you didn't know which room you were going to go back to at night? What if we gave you a different job every day? What if we changed the schedule? We like a little bit of consistency here—which there's nothing wrong with, but it's when we are clinging to it.

That's the problem with clinging. It's that it just doesn't work. And it really increases our suffering, keeps us suffering a lot more.

Our instinctive fear of the feelings of loss and sadness is another thing. It's just part of life. Sadness, loss is like this. In some ways, we know we're a little bit more alive. Sure, it shows there was clinging, but it also means we don't have to shut down and hide from seeing things clearly because, God forbid, we might feel some sadness of loss. It just runs through life. It's part of it.

Actually, can we just embrace that? Rather than either deny impermanence and just keep fighting and trying to pretend we can control and manipulate, or shut down altogether and pretend we're not clinging—pretend we don't care, pretend it's okay, it's pleasant, but I'm not going to really open to it because I don't want to get caught in clinging. That kind of indifference comes not from wisdom but from fear or ignorance.

Even in the suttas this comes up, and I find it quite touching. The Buddha's main attendant for the last twenty-five years of his life was a monk called Ananda. He comes through in the suttas as being a really kind person. It seems to me like he's the one who personalizes things. You hear about all the monks and nuns, and the Buddha gives a talk and they all get enlightened at the end. But Ananda, for twenty-five years, had quite some insight, yet he wasn't completely enlightened. And he served the Buddha with total love.

He also served as the intermediary. He loved the Dhamma. He loved the Buddha's teaching. And with great compassion, he was always trying to bring anyone who wanted to hear the Buddha to hear him. Rather than what we sometimes see these days with some great master or teacher where the people close are trying to keep other people away, with Ananda it was just the reverse. He was always trying to get people to come and hear the teachings and wake up. He was very kind.

Anyway, three months before the Buddha was going to die, when he was eighty years old, he knew what was going to happen and he told Ananda. They started talking—Ananda was present with him most of the time—about what to do with his remains when he died and all these practicalities of life. Then suddenly the Buddha was sitting there talking to some other monks and he noticed Ananda had disappeared. Of course, with what they called his divine eye, he knew what was going on. He knew where Ananda was, but he said to the other monks, "Where's Ananda? Where could Ananda be? Go and find Ananda for me."

So they went off and looked for Ananda, and where Ananda was—

He went into his lodging and stood leaning on his doorpost, crying and weeping, saying, "I'm still a learner with much to do, and the teacher is passing away—the teacher who has been so compassionate to me. What am I going to do without my teacher?" And he was just standing there weeping.

It's so human, isn't it? I find it quite touching and encouraging in a way—that it's okay. Until we're completely, always seeing things the way they are with no ignorance, when we're faced with the loss of something deeply loved, there's going to be some attachment. We're going to be sad, we're going to grieve, and that's okay. There's no reason to try and deliberately hide from things because we might feel sad.

Of course, the Buddha then called him, and in a very loving way said, "Friend Ananda, enough. You don't need to weep." He said, "How many times have I told you? Things that are pleasant and delightful are changeable, subject to separation and becoming other. So how could it be that what has come together through conditions"—meaning this body—"will not come apart again when the conditions change?"

And then he went on to really beam kindness and love to Ananda, praising him for all his good qualities. It wasn't like he was being harsh with him. He was meeting him with tremendous love. It's a touching interaction. But after twenty-five years with the Buddha, this was simply Ananda's natural human reaction. It's okay. There can be space for it—but let's not let it shut us down.

The other aspect of impermanence that makes it harder for us to recognize—and it's this aspect that the intensity of retreat and moment-to-moment mindfulness really helps us perceive more accurately—is the constancy of change.

I heard a teaching by His Holiness the Dalai Lama some years ago, and he was talking about impermanence, as teachers are wont to do. He was describing that even though we resist it, most of us would agree: conditions come together, like a life. It starts, then it exists for a while, and then it goes away. But he said that's not accurate. This is the place where we get confused, where we don't perceive accurately. Yes, conditions come together, something arises—a being is born, or a mood arises, or a cake is made, whatever it is. But the "persisting for a while"—that's what's not accurate. Nothing is persisting for a while unchanged. The change is every moment.

Thinking about it is where we get really uncomfortable. The sense of total instability, total unsettledness, the unreliability of anything—even though we can't, with our normal senses, perceive it. Like the change

in this paper: it looks steady, although even as I hold it, it's different. It's changing. The conditions are changing. But even though we don't perceive it every moment, the fact that things are so much in constant flux is something my mind isn't really comfortable with.

I think it's from this that our sense of trying to control things arises—to control the environment, to control ourselves, to control how people behave, to know what's going to happen in the future. Our obsessive planning. I'm not saying we don't plan; we need to plan. I'm talking about obsessive planning driven by fear, by control, by "it's got to be this way"—to somehow stave off the fact of constant shifting change. As if to open into that would be enormous suffering.

But of course, it's just the reverse. The cause of our suffering here is the clinging, the misperception, continuously trying to relate to any aspect of experience as if it's going to be here just the same in the next moment. If it is, okay. But if it's not, okay.

One of my favorite quotations from the Buddha: "The search for a resting place is burning. Not to need one is cool and peaceful."

The search for a resting place is burning. And that search can be in the physical world—a house, a family, a relationship. None of this is to say there's anything wrong with those things. It's the trying to hold onto them for a security they cannot promise. That's the problem.

The search for a resting place can be just wanting to be comfortable in this moment. It can be the intensity of craving we bring to our meditation practice—to get to some deep samādhi where I can rest, to get rid of this pain or this bad emotion so I can rest, to just sit somewhere I'm not near that noisy person so I can rest, to get out of the cold so I can rest.

"He abides in peace who does not abide anywhere."

This sense of not needing a resting place—you can't will it. I'm going to say willingness, but we can't will it.

Just the willingness to open into not knowing. Each moment, who knows what's going to arise in the next moment. As we were saying in one of the interviews today, that's Krishnamurti's line: a freedom from the known. That's actually what mindfulness is. Each moment, there's just mindful awareness meeting whatever's happening. That's totality of presence, just for that moment, without bringing in any assumptions or concepts or ideas of what this is or what it should be or what it will be or what it was. Just this complete innocence, freshness—what Suzuki Roshi called beginner's mind.

We say "the breath." You sit down and say, "the breath." But you actually don't know if the sensations of breath are going to be the next thing that arises. We really don't know. Moment by moment, I sit down and think, "This sitting, I'm going to really be with the breath." And ten minutes later, I haven't felt one breath consciously. Maybe a lot of other things. Maybe really conscious, really present with mindfulness. But we never really know.

It's so ingrained in our habits to look for security, to look for steadiness, to look for something as if we can rest. This is from Pema Chödrön, whom I quoted last night: "To be fully alive, fully human, and completely awake is to be continually thrown out of the nest. To live fully is to be always in no man's land, to experience each moment as completely new and fresh. To live is to be willing to die over and over again." From the awakened point of view, that's life. Death is wanting to hold on to what you have and to have every experience confirm you and congratulate you and make you feel completely together.

Isn't that what we're trying to do with meditation? And it just won't obey us. That's what's so great about meditation. You want it to confirm you and congratulate you and make you feel completely together, and it just stubbornly won't do that. That's why we love it. When you come into interviews and you say, "Oh my God, it isn't working," we say, "Great." "I'm really in this heavy emotion." "Good." It's not confirming you. It's waking us up.

So even though we say yama mara is fear of death, it's actually fear of life—being continually thrown out of the nest.

Another way we can look at our life and practice is noticing the places where we are—and I say "we are," but it's not like we're consciously sitting here thinking, "I'm doing this"—but to notice when the mind, when the habits of mind, what it reaches for, what it holds onto, what it perceives as permanent, what we're holding onto to confirm us, to make us feel together, to confirm our life.

This is from Ajahn Chah, the wonderful Thai forest monk: "Worldly knowledge and accomplishments on whatever level still leave you in this realm of suffering. Whatever happiness there may be comes about in dependence on external things. It is a happiness, but it's not the happiness of freedom, the happiness that doesn't depend on anything."

So 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. And after we lean for too long, it breaks and falls, and we fall with it. I love Ajahn Chah. Such is worldly happiness.

This is a delicate balance that we learn when we start to see all those things—reputation, wealth, sense pleasures, family, your job. When we realize that these are worldly happinesses and that leaning on them means at some point they're going to break and fall. But the delicate balance is that this doesn't mean these things are bad or wrong, or that pleasure and love and some kind of temporary happiness aren't available with them. They can be. And they can be very wholesome and lead to a lot of growth and a lot of good, wholesome action in the world. So it's not that we make the flip: "Well, everything's changing, so none of it's worth anything," and slide into aversion. No.

This is delicate. It's a sense of opening into, just beginning to let in the perceptions of constant change, of fluctuation, of the fact that we are continually thrown out of the nest—and to just be willing to hang out in that not knowing, in that instability. That actually opens us up more deeply to participate in life. It doesn't

shut us down. Not "Okay, who cares about that anyway?" They say if you know a beautiful day is only here for a day, you can really enjoy that day. So it's all like that.

The mind might say, "If I really open to this instability, life is just too fearful."

But we shut down ahead of time out of fear.

The reality isn't like that at all. It's actually just the reverse. There's a sense of the totality of presence, the immediacy, when we're totally here in this moment—open to it, accepting it, just being with it for what it is without dragging in all our ideas and assumptions and concepts. Without that demand that it's got to stay the same, without tightening and contracting even before it's gone. It's very, very different.

But we can't talk ourselves into it. This is really where we practice: the steadiness, moment after moment, of cultivating awareness, cultivating this simple quality of attention that's willing to be so fresh that we don't already know everything before we even start looking. I mean, we think we do. Maybe you don't. I don't think I do consciously, but then I keep noticing I really do think I do.

This mindfulness—this is from Krishnamurti, and I like this description of how a moment of just pure mindfulness can feel: "When you look totally"—and you could be looking at the breath, at a sound, at a sensation in the body, at a mood, at a thought—"when you look totally, you will give your whole attention, your whole being, everything of yourself. Your eyes, your ears, your nerves. You will attend with complete self-abandonment, and then there is no room for fear, no contradiction, and therefore no conflict."

It has that sense of what Guy was saying this morning: the collectedness of all the psychic energy, just for a moment. Don't extend it in time—just for a moment. So present that we're not comparing or assessing or judging or fearing into the future. It's just this. Just this. That's why I keep using Ajahn Sumedho's language: anger is like this, pain is just this, in that moment. And therefore, in that moment, there's no conflict.

This sense of mindfulness, this innocent knowing, free from—or not confused with, I would say—all the concepts and ideas that come about something. We so often confuse these for the actual experience. And it's this confusing the ideas about an experience for the experience itself that keeps us in the habit of not perceiving anicca, impermanence.

A simple example: let's use physical pain because the physical sensation is just a little more gross, a little easier to notice. There's a sensation when you're sitting, and the first awareness of it might be, "My knee is really hurting." That's already a thought. That's already a concept: knee, my knee, hurting. And I know for me, as soon as I say that, there's a visual kind of picture in my mind, almost like my whole body and my knee down there. My eyes are closed—I'm not actually seeing my knee—but there's a visual image of me, my knee down there, really hurting.

And then right away, if I don't recognize that as a concept, if I don't bring attention just back into the

sensation—we might say maybe it's burning or tingling. Yes, that's also a concept, but it's a little less fraught with sense of self and storyline and past and future. We don't go as far down the road with "my burning" as we do with "my bum knee that I had arthroscopic surgery on last year, and I can't believe I'm sitting here in this stupid hall. But if I go to a chair, that's failing, so I have to sit here even though..." Way down the road.

Bare experience would just be sensation, calm mind around it. But what we do is this: there's the perception of sensation, the perception leads to thoughts about it—like I said, my knee is hurting, I have a bad knee. Those thoughts, if we don't recognize them, very quickly form a story or a view that we absolutely believe. We don't even realize it's a description, a view. And that becomes the reality.

In this example, that could be what I said: I have a bad knee, I had surgery last year, and I know if I keep sitting like this, I'm going to do X, Y, and Z to my knee. I'm not saying whether it's true or not, but that's the whole view that immediately can spring up when the attention connects with burning.

I use that example because you can kind of see the way it moves.

One of the ways we don't recognize impermanence is that we don't see this process clearly. The lack of continuity in mindfulness actually hides impermanence from us.

Take the same dynamic with an emotion. You're sitting, and a very familiar but difficult emotion arises—we each have our favorite, the one we believe is really the root of who we are. Despair or loneliness or frustration or fear or depression, whatever it might be. And it's coming. Let's say it's worry.

You're noticing, and you feel like you're really mindful. "Here's worry. This is the story about the worry." We feel we're being really fresh with it because we see the story. "That's worry. But worry feels like this. I'm not buying the story."

Then something else happens. You go through the sitting, other things arise. Then you come back and say, "Well, this is here. It's been here all day." But the worry actually went away for a while. You didn't notice it at all. Then later in the sitting, or in the next sitting, there's worry again. Whether it's about the same thing as before or something different, you notice it and think, "I'm being really fresh with this."

But the thought and the view being solidified—we may not recognize this—is that this worry is always here. And it gets complicated. I might say, "Well, didn't it go away when you were eating lunch?" And you respond, "Well, I wasn't aware of it then because I was eating, but it was there. It was there waiting. And as soon as I got quiet, there was the worry."

It's as if we have a mountain of worry or despair or whatever, sitting down there in the gut or the throat, wherever we feel it. And sometimes we're distracted and don't feel it, but we know that when we're really mindful, there it is again. And that's who I am—this despair, this worry, this whatever.

So we're not acknowledging the impermanence in our experience. We're actually consciously denying it.

"I didn't notice it, but that's just because my mindfulness wasn't good enough. If my mindfulness had been continuous, I would have known this worry was here all the time."

In fact, it's just the reverse. If we're really continuous in our attention, we'll notice something quite different. As strong as that despair or whatever is—you're really in it, it's really intense—suddenly there's just a little thought that comes through: "I wonder what's for lunch." And we go, "Well, that's distraction. Back to the worry." That didn't count.

Or we do go off and wonder about lunch, and after a few minutes of "I had pizza yesterday so it can't be pizza today, it can't possibly be as good," then we think, "Boy, I'm really a lightweight. Here I am, I could really be working with this core issue, and I'm worrying about what's for lunch, when really worry is who I am." We don't even want to get back to it. And we don't acknowledge that it's completely changing, changing, changing.

Or as I mentioned, a lot of times the really wholesome, positive states—contentment comes in, some samādhi, some steadiness of mind, equanimity—and as Guy was saying, we think, "Well, that's just what's supposed to happen," so we don't acknowledge it. Many people think, "This is some fluke. It's got nothing to do with me, because I know I'm going to be back in the despair any moment." So okay, contentment arises—let's not even pay any attention to it.

That's not going to hang around. And always kind of matching some idea of who we are or what we are, really leaning on some rotting old tree trunk of some idea about ourselves, instead of recognizing the constant change.

How many thoughts do you think you've had since you got here? Any idea? Sure, a lot of them are similar—I'll grant you that. But none of them are the same. Each thought is a new thought. They may not be the most creative thoughts in the world, but each thought is a new thought. You can't have the same thought twice. Similar, yes, but the same, no.

Just really noticing how much we deny the constant change. And there's another thing we do—I think someone mentioned it in a talk—selective perception. This is why "freedom from the known" is such an important line. We recognize, or I think Rodney said in his talk, we open to what we're already comfortable with. If you have certain political views, you're open to other people with those political views, and you can't see anything good about people who don't have those views.

I've seen that with myself, with some politician that I really have strong negative views about. I don't want to perceive anything wholesome or good about that person. That person couldn't have anything good going on. My mind just likes to make these boxes. It's not open for discovery. It's not fresh. And so we have this selective perception all the time.

"I'm this kind of person. I'm a low-energy kind of person." So if I'm on retreat and I wake up in the middle of the night—well, I'm a low-energy kind of person, I know that from my life. I need nine hours of sleep. If

I get up now, there's no way I'm going to make it through the day because I'm a low-energy type of person. So I force myself back to sleep.

This is sort of from my own experience, what I'm saying. It took me years to actually say, "You know what? I'm wide awake. Get up. Just get up." And I'd find when I'd get up—not only was I a little sleepy, so what? I'd get up and I love the early morning hours. I don't need as much sleep when I'm on retreat. But how am I going to find that out if I'm telling myself, "No, I'm a low-energy type of person and this is what I know and this is how it is"?

Nothing's ever the same. No two days are the same. No situation's the same.

So other ways we deny impermanence: Someone mentioned how we try to recreate an experience. Recreate that really concentrated sitting. Recreate that perfect walking. Recreate that misty early morning, so we leap out of bed and run outside at exactly the same time because we had this really nice emotion when we were there.

But this time, of course, there's no way you can have the same experience twice. The conditions are different. The day's going to be different—misty or not. Your mental states will definitely be different because the day before you walked out open, no expectations, just present. Today you're running out filled with greed and hurrying and frustration. "Oh, let me feel this nice thing again." I don't think it's going to happen. It's going to be different. There's no way the conditions are ever all the same.

So what's the suffering in that? Trying to deny the shifting, the change.

Another thing is noticing, not trying to make something go away.

That's just aversion and wanting. But noticing when something's really gone—that's different. Like, for example, a strong emotion. When it's gone and you think, "Well, I just didn't notice it." Try actually noticing: "Now I'm not feeling despair, I'm feeling hunger." Try noticing: "There was contentment and that's gone, and now there's frustration." Just notice.

I know this is going to sound silly, but somehow this was a big insight for me. I was eating on a retreat not that long ago, very mindfully. I was quite quiet and slowed down, chewing, chewing, that little burst of flavor. And if you really stay with it, you see the flavor's gone like that, and then you're just masticating kind of tasteless stuff. You want to swallow it and get another bite of flavor. But I was just staying there, and I swallowed.

Usually when I'm paying attention like that, I swallow and there's sensations here and it's going down. In my mind, the concept is "This is the food and it's going down"—a whole concept of continuity. But this time I was just staying there, and I swallowed. I was in my mouth, and I swallowed, and the food was so gone. I mean, it was really gone. There was a sensation here, but that wasn't the food. That was just sensation here. I didn't hold on to the concept. I know this sounds silly, but that sense of the complete

gone-ness of it—I couldn't find the food. It was gone.

We have to take the little insights we get. But it really spread out. Just notice that kind of thing and stay there with the gone-ness.

You can also notice beginnings. Meeting experience with this freshness, this beginner's mind—that's actually what mindfulness practice is. Whether it's the breath or the steps or sensation or emotion, all the instructions are just different ways of trying to help us, in any particular moment, to drop the concepts, drop the ideas from the past and what we want from the future and what we think should happen or will happen, and just sit down. "Well, what's going to happen now?"

I know when I'm on retreat and I'm really dropping in when I sit down and just go, "Okay, let's see what happens." No prior preconceptions. Not leaning into the future or dragging the past after us.

This is from the Buddha, a particular sutta called "One Fortunate Attachment"—actually, there are three suttas with the same verse. He says: "Let not a person revive the past or on the future build her hopes. For the past has been left behind and the future has not been reached. Instead, with insight, let her see each presently arisen state. Let her know that and be sure of it, invincibly, unshakably."

One of the monks gives an exposition of what that means. It's pretty much what you'd think, but I just want to say—he asks, what does it mean to not revive the past? It doesn't mean we can't think about the past. It doesn't mean we're so in the moment that we have no idea what our name is. People say, "If everything's changing and you're just open to the moment, how are you going to find your way home? How do you remember how to get to the dining room?" That's just our mind going through its trips. It's not like that. We can remember the past—well, less and less—but we can somewhat remember.

As this monk explained, reviving the past in the way the Buddha's talking about means one's consciousness becomes bound up with desire and lust when thinking about any particular aspect. "In the past, my body was like this, or I had this mood, or I had this form"—it becomes bound up with desire and lust.

And because of that, you delight in it, your consciousness shrinks, and that's what he's calling reviving the past. We're bound to it and we suffer.

The same thing about building one's hopes on the future. It's not that we can't make plans for the future or have a thought about what's to come. That in itself is no problem—that's not suffering. But again, when one's consciousness becomes bound up with desire, with attachment about building one's hopes on what's going to be in the future, then one becomes bound to it, one becomes suffering.

And what does it mean to be invincible in regard to presently arisen states? I love that translation—*invinci ble*. It means one's consciousness, one's awareness, one's presence is not bound up with desire, attachment, aversion, or lust about this presently arisen state. In other words, we're simply meeting this

moment totally, just as it is, with totality of presence but no agenda. No agenda.

If you try to think, "How can I live like that?"—that's too much. But if you try to simply experience that in a moment, that's not too much. That's totally experienceable, and we all experience it many, many moments. In that moment of presence with whatever it is—sadness, hearing, sensation, contentment, it doesn't matter what's happening—that moment of pure presence without being bound by reactivity or fear, we are invincible. Invincible in terms of being unshakable. It's all workable. There's no suffering. There's no problem. There's nothing else one needs to do. Invincible. That's really a very powerful statement.

So this willingness, just this willingness to begin to explore the possibility of the perception of impermanence, the possibility of instability—not thinking about it, but bringing this pure perception, this freshness, this innocence of attention and totality to just this moment, just this moment—this willingness not to know, to recognize that each moment of mindfulness is like stepping into the unknown. That's what we're practicing, really. Opening to the unknown.

That doesn't leave us feeling bereft. That doesn't leave us feeling like, "Oh my God, life is unbearable." It actually opens us to enormous appreciation of the beauty, of the wonder, of the mystery. It doesn't mean it's always beautiful or lovely, but just the wonder of life, the sensitivity to be so present. When we don't know what's going to happen, isn't it a miracle? Whatever it is. And it doesn't mean we can't respond appropriately. Actually, we can be much more flexible because we don't have all our ideas about what should be happening.

We've already decided ahead of time what we're going to say, like in the interviews, right? You know what you're going to say and what we're going to answer, and it goes back and forth. You already had a better interview before you even came to see us—that one would work better anyway. But it's never like that. Anything you've ever planned, has it ever really gone that way? I used to sit on retreat having all these fantasies of what would happen when I went home and saw my partner—this and that, they'd say this and I'd do that—and then the next sitting would be a different way, and then a different way. Then I'd realize, okay, whatever I've thought, the one thing I know is that none of that is what's going to happen. We're wasting our time. We don't know.

So when we're open and present, we just appreciate anything, and that appropriate response is much more accessible. It's really such a different way to live, just in the immediacy of now, without dragging in the past, leaning into the future.

I want to close with a poem by Billy Collins that I really like because it gives that feeling to me. It's called "Aimless Love."

This morning, as I walked along the lake shore, I fell in love with a wren, and later in the day with a mouse the cat had dropped under the dining room table. In the shadows of an autumn evening, I fell for a

seamstress still at her machine in the tailor's window, and later for a bowl of broth, steam rising like smoke from a naval battle. This is the best kind of love, I thought, without recompense, without gifts or unkind words, without suspicion or silence on the telephone. The love of the chestnut, the jazz cap and one hand on the wheel. No lust, no slam of the door. The love of the miniature orange tree, the clean white shirt, the hot evening shower, the highway that cuts across Florida. No waiting, no huffiness or rancor.

Just a twinge every now and then for the wren who had built her nest on a low branch overhanging the water, and for the dead mouse still dressed in its light brown suit.

But my heart is always propped up in a field on its tripod, ready for the next arrow.

After I carried the mouse by the tail to a pile of leaves in the woods, I found myself standing at the bathroom sink, gazing down affectionately at the soap, so patient and soluble, so at home in its pale green soap dish.

I could feel myself falling again as I felt its turning in my wet hands and caught the scent of lavender and stone.

So let's just sit quietly for a minute.

Nisargadatta Maharaj once said: "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."

Free from the obsession with what next.

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