The Three Characteristics

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:01:29

Sharon and Sally both talked in the last couple of nights about the factor of wisdom and how important it is in meditation practice. Sharon talked about how loving-kindness practice really changes us by developing understanding through the interconnection that comes from metta practice. Sally talked about how in some Buddhist traditions, wisdom is paired as a complement to mindfulness, understanding that they go together and that the role of mindfulness is really to foster wisdom.

We could say that wisdom is the most important thing that develops during Dharma practice. Experiences come and go. Concentration comes and goes. Mindfulness comes and goes. But the things that we understand change us, and those changes travel with us for hopefully the rest of our lives.

This is a funny word in the West, the word wisdom. It doesn't have a generally acknowledged meaning in our culture, so it has a special meaning within the teachings of the Buddha. It's not just about book knowledge, although that can play a role. It's not just about IQ. It's not even about emotional intelligence alone. And it's not just about accumulating life experience. In the lineage of the Buddhist teachings, wisdom means the understanding of life the way it is—which means our inner experience and our outer experience, what their constituent parts are really like, what our human experience is all about.

Insight meditation comes from an Indian word, vipassana, which we could understand as seeing things the way they are. So you could say the goal of our insight meditation practice is to see things in our experience the way they truly are. And the understanding is that this is the avenue in our lineage to a true and reliable happiness.

This factor of wisdom is a natural capacity that we all have, but it needs to be woken up. We wake it up through paying attention. And then as it starts to wake up, we develop it and strengthen it through various kinds of examination and investigation.

So where should we look to see the way things are? The Buddha suggested looking specifically at three aspects of our experience that he called the three characteristics or marks of existence. These three marks apply to all existent things, all phenomena. The way he described it, he said that all conditioned things are impermanent; all conditioned things are unsatisfactory; and all things are without self. These are the three marks: impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and this aspect of not-self.

There are a couple of words here that need some description. What is a conditioned thing? A conditioned thing is something that comes from prior causes and conditions. It's something that is subject to coming into existence, and by virtue of having come into existence based on underlying conditions, it will also

pass out of existence when those conditions change.

All the aspects of mind and body that we've been practicing with here are conditioned. Sensations of the breath, the sounds that come and go, the sensations in our bodies, the thoughts and emotions that are passing through—these things all have underlying causes. They come, they last for a while, and then they pass away. These are considered conditioned things, every one of them.

All conditioned things are impermanent, meaning they're subject to arising and passing. All conditioned things are unsatisfactory. This word needs some explanation too. It doesn't mean that all conditioned things are unpleasant. A lot of conditioned things are very pleasant. We can have pleasant experiences with the breath. We can have pleasant experiences of sounds. We can have blissful sensations in the body. We can have beautiful emotions—love and compassion, happiness. So it doesn't mean that they're unpleasant, but what it means is that none of those things has the ability to give us a lasting sense of happiness. None of them is capable of providing a deep sense of satisfaction, which we yearn for. As humans, we have this longing for a deep and reliable sense of being satisfied, and none of these things that arise and pass have the ability to give that to us because of their impermanent nature.

Then the last statement is a little different. All things are not-self. It doesn't say all conditioned things, but all things. What the Buddha is pointing to here is that there is one element, or you might say dimension, of our human nature that is a thing in his language, but it's not a conditioned thing. So what is that?

It means there's something within us that's not subject to arising and passing. There's something within us that isn't caused by prior conditions. There's something within us that isn't impermanent.

So he gave a special name to that. He called it Nibbāna, or Nirvana in Pali. It's a subject of a lot of mystery in Buddhist writings and thinking because it's hard to put your finger on exactly what that thing is. We're not going to try to define it yet. We'll point to it a little later in the talk. Just be aware that everything is not self. That means all the conditioned things as well as this mysterious dimension of Nibbāna is not self. None of these things are self.

So by the Buddha's recommendation, we want to explore these three statements through our direct experience and see if we think they're true or not. The flavor of his teaching is not to say something and expect us to believe it. The flavor is, here's the way I see it—check it out and see what you find. So the recommendation is to check these statements out and see what you find in your own personal experience, directly.

There's a story from the Jewish tradition. You may have heard this from other traditions as well, but I rather like the Jewish version of it. The story is around King Solomon, who ruled around 900 BC. King Solomon, it's said, had a minister who he felt was getting a little too prideful. He was a chief minister and obviously a very powerful individual, and the king thought he was getting a little too full of himself. So he decided he would take him down a notch.

He gave him an assignment that he didn't think the minister would be able to carry out. The king said, "I hear there's a magic ring somewhere in the world. And this magic ring has the power—if you give it to a happy person, it will make them sad. And if you give it to a sad person, it will make them happy. I want you to find this magic ring because I want it. And I'll give you six months to do it."

So the minister felt his reputation was on the line with this assignment. He asked around all over the kingdom and spoke with travelers who'd been through other realms, asking if they knew of such a ring. And everybody said, "Never heard of such a thing. I don't know that there is one. You'll never find it."

He was running out of time. The six-month deadline was coming. There was going to be quite a big banquet where he was going to be asked to present this ring to the king, and he was very afraid of failing. So in desperation, he went to the local marketplace to a very poor ring seller—a man who didn't have any fancy jewelry or a big stand, just a very poor man. And he said, "I need to find for the king a ring, a magic ring that will make a happy person sad and a sad person happy. Do you have such a ring?"

And the ring merchant said, "Wait just a minute." Then he took up a simple gold band and with a tiny stylus he etched in it three syllables. And then he handed the ring to the minister.

The minister went to the banquet. The king said, "Well, minister, where's my magic ring? You've had six months to find it." And he was sure that the minister wouldn't have found it.

So the minister says, "Yes, your majesty, and here it is."

The king took it up and read the three syllables, and the smile dropped from his face. Because those three syllables said: This too will pass.

That was the magic saying that would make a happy person sad and a sad person happy. So this is really a teaching on impermanence, isn't it? And a teaching on equanimity.

Now the fact is, it won't make a happy meditator sad, because we've already figured that out. But generally it would make a happy person sad. So this truth—this too shall pass.

It's an interesting reflection that we can bring to every single moment of our experience. And it's always the case. We know this, right? We're not dumb. We've been reading dharma books for a long time. We know that everything changes, and yet somehow we haven't fully grokked the full implication of that truth.

How do we know that? Because life keeps surprising us.

Here's a simple example. Most of us learned probably in the seventh grade that what we think of as solid matter is actually full of atoms and molecules composed of electrons, protons, and neutrons that are whizzing around through mostly empty space. And we can't even find an electron, actually. It's just kind of a probability smear somewhere in the space of an atom—an unfindable particle. But how many of us

actually experience the world as mostly empty space? Even though we believe that to be true, don't we mostly experience this world as full of solid things, this physical world? Generally we do, so we haven't quite integrated that teaching on impermanence that the scientists tell us is true.

Other things surprise us too. I was in the middle of a dharma talk at Spirit Rock a couple of years ago, and we heard this kind of dreadful cry. It was a cry like a baby was crying. The caretakers went out to investigate, and I went out after the talk to see what it was. A deer had died—had probably been killed by some dogs. So the deer was there near the meditation hall. A group of us had gathered around it, and we said some loving-kindness and well wishes for it. It had already died when we got there.

The caretakers then called the Humane Society, who offered to come out to the campus and pick the deer up and take it away. So they moved it down out of the meditation retreat facility to the entrance and waited for the Humane Society to come. Unfortunately, they never came.

So over the next days of the retreat, I would pass by that deer virtually every day. It was by the side of the driveway, and I would watch what was happening to it. Because of all the scavengers on the Spirit Rock land, that deer disappeared rather quickly. We have turkey vultures, we have raccoons, we have mice and rats, we have lots of ants and insects. Within a few days, the bones had been picked clean. There was no flesh left—there was fur and bones. And the rest of that deer was just gone.

So how is it that a creature can be so alive a few days earlier and then so completely gone a few days later? It was shocking to me. Why? Because I hadn't really fully taken into account the deer's impermanence while it was alive. It shocked me. It surprised me.

By my age—if a lot of you are kind of around my age—we've probably all had the experience of having friends die, loved ones, parents, siblings. And it always has come as a shock to me that someone can be so alive one day and then the next day not there. How does that happen?

So although we know in our mind this truth of impermanence, we don't always know it in our gut. It keeps surprising us. You could say that a lot of our dharma practice is about realizing this truth more and more thoroughly so that life doesn't surprise us in that way. It doesn't shock us so much.

We know this truth is accurate on a cosmic level. Earlier generations didn't know this, but we know that the sun itself wasn't here nine billion years ago or so. The Earth wasn't here about four and a half billion years ago. And in a few billion more years, the sun will burn out and all life on Earth will end because it will be heated by the sun's burning out. So all life on Earth will be gone in just another few billion years. We know that scale of impermanence is also true.

And in some cosmological theories, even space goes away. If the expansion that's happened results in another contraction back to a very small core of matter, space may even disappear. So we can see this truth on a cosmic scale.

We can also see this truth at the scale of our own lives. And this is interesting to explore, because we receive a certain message from the culture that the way to happiness is through acquiring more—more stuff, more money, a bigger house, a newer car, a better stereo, the latest iPhone or computer. Acquiring more seems to be what the culture thinks makes for happiness.

But we all know that's not the whole story, or we would never have come here. We may still wonder why we came, but at least we know that acquisition alone wasn't going to do it.

There was an interesting article in the New York Times about a book by a researcher at Harvard named Daniel Gilbert. He was researching this question of happiness and unhappiness and what makes for it. What he found is that we're not very good predictors of what will make us happy. The New York Times article was entitled "The Futile Pursuit of Happiness"—the way we usually go about it.

He studied people who had good things happen to them and who had bad things happen to them, then measured their happiness level over time after that event. He found, for example, that getting a new car—like a new BMW, for somebody who really wanted one—did increase their happiness level for a while, but then it tapered off again, basically back down to the level it had been at before. This was consistent across many subjects. Whatever the thing was, it produced a glow at the beginning, an increase in happiness, but then it fell back down to the standard level.

But then he also looked at events that were painful—if somebody broke an arm or leg or lost a job. He found that those events did make people unhappy, but the unhappiness didn't last as long as they expected, and their resilience brought them back to the happiness level they were at before. So the good things didn't last as long in their impact, and the bad things didn't last as long in their impact, as people had thought they would. We couldn't predict accurately what would make us happy or unhappy. That was a very interesting finding.

The article summarized: on average, bad events proved less intense and more transient than test participants predicted. Good events also proved less intense and briefer as well.

There is a nice conclusion from this. Dr. Gilbert said, "Hope and fear are enduring features of the human experience, but it is unlikely that people are going to abandon them anytime soon just because some psychologist told them they should." This is probably true. He even said he was ambivalent about his own conclusions: "I don't think I want to give up all these motivations. I don't think I want to learn too much from my own research in that sense."

It's interesting. We don't really want to understand the full implications of impermanence. There's a resistance to seeing that truth, that things change in that way. But when we reflect on this study, we realize that what it can strengthen is our trust in equanimity. Sharon talked about how these changing conditions, the vicissitudes of life, come and go all the time. Equanimity is about staying even, staying balanced in the midst of all that. And this study supports that conclusion—that we can learn to be calmer

if the wisdom is there to support it.

So we've understood that external events in the material world aren't going to finally do it for us. We come into the spiritual world and discover, as we stay with it, new sources of joy and happiness and satisfaction. I'll just say from my own experience that the richness of satisfaction I've found from meditation practice has been much greater than the satisfaction I used to find from things in the world. It's both greater in magnitude and more reliable.

We come here and new realms open up to us that have really a lot to offer. We find joy in loving-kindness. We find joy in being able to open the heart to compassion and deep connection with others in a way that's truly fulfilling. It shows us what life as a human being can be about and the richness that can be in it. We find through developing this present-moment attention of mindfulness that the mind can collect, develop concentration, and come into states of peace that I, at least, had never known before I meditated. I had never known this level of peace and the contentment that can come with it.

Of course, then what happens is we want to repeat those experiences too, or we want them to last all the time—and they don't either. The heart is sometimes open and deeply connected and joyful, and then it will close. We work over several days in retreat toward an experience of collectedness and feel a great sense of calm and relaxation and ease, and it lasts for a while, and then it changes. The mind becomes active again, the body feels restless, and there are a lot of thoughts and emotions.

So here too, we find ourselves going through the ups and downs of change—pleasant and collected experiences, difficult and random experiences. If we are wanting things to always be on the pleasant side, then we're not going to find this very fulfilling. We're going to run into friction with that wish.

This experience also teaches us a lot about impermanence, the changing conditions of heart and mind and body. And as we go through these ups and downs again and again and again, we start to realize: oh, maybe it's always going to be like this. And maybe that's okay.

Maybe I can find my balance in this changing ocean of conditions. Maybe that's possible.

But in between, there are a lot of these ups and downs. And it's funny how we come to meditation expecting these states to last. It's so interesting. Even though we know cognitively about impermanence, when we hit a state, we think it's going to be there for a while.

I remember when I was five years old, I got measles. And I hated it. I didn't like being sick in the first place, but then I hated the way my face looked. I had these red spots all over. I remember being convinced—I told my mother this—I know those red spots are never going away. I was absolutely certain I would have that on my face the rest of my life. But somehow it passed.

A few years ago, I went to Burma to go on a meditation retreat, a six-week retreat. I arrived right at the start of the rainy season. There's a three-month rains retreat in all the monasteries in Southeast Asia, and

this one started at the beginning of September. I arrived right at the start, and the teacher, a concentration master named Pa-Auk Sayadaw, agreed to ordain me. I'd been a monk years before in Thailand, twenty years before, and I'd left it a little too early. I'd always had a longing to be back in the ordained life again. So I was able to go and meditate, and then he offered to let me ordain again as a monk—something I'd wanted to do for a long time, to re-experience the beauty of the monastic life.

I arrived one day late in the afternoon, about five o'clock. I was shown to my hut, and the next morning I was taken into town, still a layperson, to buy my robes and bowl and other monkly accessories to prepare me for the six weeks I was going to be there. Then right after lunch that day, I shaved my head, went through an ordination ceremony, and put on my new robes. So there I was, less than twenty-four hours after arriving from America—a Burmese monk.

It was kind of a shock because the transition had been so quick. I hadn't been ordained for a while. I'd kind of forgotten how to tie my robes, to tell you the truth. I felt a little awkward. But I loved having the opportunity to do that.

We were right at the start of the rainy season, and that's when it started raining, almost on cue. The day I got ordained was really sunny, and the next day the rain started. If you know the tropics in the rainy season, it's intense. It was coming down about three inches a day in this part of Burma, the southeast part.

My kuti was a fifteen-minute walk uphill from the meditation hall, where I had to go about five times a day for group sittings—the shortest of which was an hour and a half in length, and the longest was two hours. We'd collect at a central dining hall to get our meals, and I'd take my meal back to my hut to eat it.

So there I was, trying to adjust to monastery life, undergoing this very rigorous schedule common at that monastery, and also starting to practice the concentration practice that Sayadaw taught: keep your attention on the space above your upper lip all waking moments of the day. This was the only meditation object—right here, no other. It was rigorous.

The rain was coming down. It came for about two weeks without any break. I didn't see the sun for about two weeks. I remember one day walking back to my hut after the midday meal was served. I was carrying my bowl in one hand, the lid on top holding a dessert that I was really looking forward to. The bowl was hot because it was freshly steamed rice and stir-fried vegetables. In my other hand was an umbrella because the rain was really coming down. I was walking up this rocky, muddy path in a pair of plastic flip-flops while my robe was falling off my left shoulder. I was trying to squeeze that up while Burmese laypeople were bowing to me because they really appreciated that a Westerner would come and try to practice, leave behind the affluent lifestyle and come to Burma.

At that point, I started to think: What am I doing here?

It went like that for at least two, two and a half weeks. I got very discouraged. I've practiced through a lot of different conditions, but these were the toughest I'd ever experienced. I kept telling myself: This is going

to change. The rain isn't going to last the whole six weeks. Surely it's going to change.

You'll get better at tying your robe. You won't need the umbrella every time you go out. And you'll get used to spending eighteen hours a day at your upper lip. But even though I told myself all of that, I was really getting discouraged. It's funny to look back on it now, because the conditions were kind of extreme. But at the time, it wasn't easy at all.

Also, I was eating just one meal a day—a vegetarian diet of basically rice and stir-fried vegetables, very little protein. Over those six weeks, I lost almost half a pound a day, and I didn't have a lot to lose in the first place. I was losing weight like crazy.

So I was getting very discouraged. And I happened to have brought with me a little altar piece, which was a photograph of the Dalai Lama. I love the Dalai Lama. I find him maybe the most inspiring human being on the planet. So I had this photo of him there, and I thought, I'm going to ask for advice. I'm desperate. I don't usually contact the spirit world or anything like that, but I thought, "Your Holiness, I'm really having a difficult time. Can you give me a word of advice?"

Immediately—and I don't actually think this came out of the spirit world—but immediately his voice appeared in my head. It was very clear, and it had his Indian-accented English. He said, "Yes. Stay optimistic, cheerful, and confident. A positive attitude is the best support."

That actually picked me up. It really picked me up. I thought, stay positive—I can try that. So I tried. I took that advice, and sometimes I could do it. Even in the midst of everything, I'd say to myself, stay optimistic, stay cheerful. And I could put a smile on my face and feel great about being there. Other times, the rain was coming down and I was in one of those two-hour sits, and I wasn't so optimistic or confident. But sometimes I could do it.

When I couldn't, though, it felt like this was going to last forever. And that was the place from which I had to ask for the advice—I thought I was stuck. I really thought that gloom and discouragement was going to last. And that's how those states are, aren't they? When they descend like that, it's hard to remember this truth of impermanence. It's hard to remember that things are going to change. And yet, they do. They do.

But the good states—sometimes when they come, we have the same expectation. When I first started getting quiet in my retreats, I thought, oh, it's always going to be like this now. My life is going to be just like this forevermore. And of course, that didn't stay either. So even though we know about impermanence, sometimes it's hard to really remember it when these conditions happen for us.

Another way that we see impermanence in our life—and I see it a lot given where I'm at in my age—is in the aging process. I've seen my body go through a lot of changes over especially the last ten to fifteen years. And in fact, this fact of aging is said to be one of the things that inspired Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha-to-be, to set out on his spiritual journey. It's said that when he was still a young man of twenty-nine, he journeyed outside his palace, visited a local town, and saw an old person, a sick person,

and a corpse. Seeing those three beings woke him up to the truth of impermanence.

So aging, illness, and death are what are called in this tradition the heavenly messengers, because they bring down this kind of remembrance for us. Remember where this is headed. And it provides a real motivation for our practice and for understanding now, while we still have our health and our well-being.

So our bodies do this. We don't ask for it, but our bodies do this. And this started to hit me actually quite a long time ago. In my thirties, my hair started to go gray. I still considered myself very young. Sally and I were at a monastery somewhere in England, listening to a Dharma talk. We'd sat together, listened to the talk, and then I wandered off. Somebody turned to her and said, "Well, who was that man you were with?" She said, "What man?" They said, "Oh, that middle-aged man you were with." I thought, wow, I'm only thirty-five and I'm already middle-aged? It was shocking. And then it gets more shocking.

You know you're in this phase when you hang out with a bunch of friends at a meal table and the talk turns to what we call the organ recital. How are the kidneys? How's the liver? How's the spine? A lot of these conversations happen when you get to be my age.

It's not easy to lose our capacities through aging. We lose physical capacity, we lose mental capacity, we lose our looks. I was really struck by the honesty of a conversation a few years ago when I was sitting with this really wonderful American monk who's lived in England and run a monastery there for a long time, named Ajahn Sumedho. He's very honest and also funny about his process. He said, "Yeah, you know, I think I look ugly now." He was in his early seventies then. "And it's not much fun. Aging is not what the self likes." But then he added, "It's very interesting from a Dharma point of view." And it really is. We learn so much from this process. We understand what life is about. We understand what aging is about. We start to understand what death might be about.

There's an interesting passage from the Mahabharata, the ancient Indian epic—a collection of poems, stories, and plays from a long, long time ago, with many stories nested within it. The Bhagavad Gita is tucked within it as just a small piece. In one dialogue, someone is asked, "What's the greatest miracle in existence?" The answer comes: the greatest miracle is that everyone is surrounded by death but believes that they themselves won't die.

It's kind of true, isn't it? It's hard to take in this heavenly messenger. It's hard to take in this truth about our life. I think the psyche has some defenses against recognizing that fact, that truth, because it's unsettling when it's called to mind. But it's a very powerful reminder of the truth of impermanence.

One of the other heavenly messengers for the Buddha was seeing the corpse that day, seeing a dead person. So it's become part of our lineage that if one has the opportunity, one visits and contemplates dead bodies. Sally and I just had the opportunity to do this a few weeks ago in California. A friend who's also a meditation teacher has a connection with a professor who runs the anatomy lab at a college in Santa Cruz. He arranged for us and some other friends to go down, and she opened up the lab to us, letting us view

and touch the dissected bodies that her students had been working with.

It was fascinating because we seldom get this opportunity. Now you know what meditation teachers like to do in their spare time. There were a few of us down there—it was good mutual support. We weren't sure how it was going to feel. The bodies were brought out from the cold room, from the refrigerator where they were stored.

They were uncovered and we could stand next to them. They had already been dissected, so the instructor just took various layers off. We were able to look inside the chest cavity. We were able to look inside the skull. And I was able to actually hold half of a skull that still had the brain inside it. It was very heavy. I hadn't expected it to be that heavy. And to hold the liver of this man who had died probably a year before—they'd had him for a while. It was also very heavy. I was surprised how much mass is in the liver.

And then, of course, the important reflection is: that will be me someday. That's kind of shocking because we all like our bodies and we don't like to think that they will become that, but that is the truth of things. It's considered a very healthy reflection in our tradition to realize that and to have that contact and to know that that is the outcome of life. It continues to inspire me to want to practice and to understand.

Because there is this kind of inbuilt defense against seeing that reality, the Buddha recommended that we reflect daily on these truths, in order to keep them in our mind and to inspire us to understand while we still have health, vitality, intelligence, and energy. So he recommended that every day we reflect: I am of the nature to grow old. I have not gone beyond aging. I am of the nature to grow sick. I have not gone beyond illness. I am of the nature to die. I have not gone beyond death. Just to remind ourselves, use our time wisely while we still have it.

Then, as we come into meditation, a whole other dimension of impermanence starts to open up to us. In our reflective life outside, we can bring in these reflections on aging, illness, and death, and it starts to shift the way we understand life and the way we value the preciousness of our time. But there's another level of insight that comes out of meditation that I want to talk about.

This message of quantum mechanics—that everything is in rapid change, that all physical matter is in flux—has a correlate in meditation experience, but it's not so easy to find. As we attend in a really continuous way, like through a retreat, to the moment-by-moment knowing of breath, body, sounds, emotions, thoughts, smells, taste, touch, we start to look at each of those sense experiences, each of those sense doors really closely, and we can ask: Is there any solidity there? Just like quantum mechanics reveals the lack of solidity in physical matter, this meditative exploration, supported by mindfulness and concentration, can let us look at the question of solidity in the experience of our six senses.

For instance, tuning into sounds. Any solidity in sounds? Or are they all just of the nature of appearing, disappearing, coming, going? None of them last very long.

What about thoughts? Solid? Thoughts are so ephemeral. I think Sally was talking about that when she

was guiding the other morning. What is a thought? If we look at it closely with mindfulness, it may just go—right on the spot, it can just pop. If we don't look at it closely and invest in it, it can run our life. But if we look with mindfulness and steadiness, the thought is just this little blip.

How about emotions? Have you found a solid thing in the emotional world? Has any emotion lasted more than a few hours since you've been here? Usually at most maybe a couple of days. And then even while they're here, have you ever tried getting a hold of one? They're so cloud-like. We can feel them if we slow down, but they're very subtle appearances.

What about the body? We know what the body looks like from the anatomy books, right? There are solid hunks of bone and flesh and tendons and organs. But is that the most reliable guide to the body, the anatomy photographs?

Or is a more reliable guide our own awareness? Perhaps our own awareness and its intimacy with the body is a more reliable way, a more reliable place to look.

So what does your awareness reveal about the sensations in your body? Is any body sensation truly solid? Or if you look closely, is it always kind of changing and pulsing, getting bigger, getting smaller, turning on and turning off, growing and shrinking, vibrating, changing moment by moment? Look closely if you haven't done this, and see if you don't detect that fluidity, even in the sensations that seem most solid in the body.

When we look closely with the mind that's concentrated, the body also is just coming, going. Sensations just arising, changing, and dissolving. When we look closely, every facet of our experience with this still mind of meditation, what we see is things dissolving. The solidity that we normally assume the world has—it doesn't have that solidity when we look this closely.

We might be able to tell ourselves everything's impermanent, but when we look this way through meditation, we really know it. We know it firsthand, even closer than the book on quantum mechanics. We know how fluid everything is in our human experience. And then it starts to be clear that we can't hold on. The reason we can't hold on is there's no solid thing there to take hold of. We get this in our marrow—that we really can't find a solid thing to latch onto.

The Buddha said that this level of impermanence is like someone being swept down a river. There's a strong current carrying them downstream. They don't want to be carried downstream, so they keep reaching for things on the bank to take hold of, to stop their flow. But everywhere they reach, they just clasp a bunch of grass and it pulls out in their hand, and they keep being swept down the stream. This is our situation if we're looking to hold on to the things of the senses. None of them are solid enough to be able to support us.

This is from Rumi: "Think of how phenomena come trooping out of the desert of non-existence into this materiality. Morning and night they arrive in a long line and take over from each other. It's my turn now.

Get out. This place of phenomena is a wide exchange of highways with everything going all sorts of different ways. We seem to be sitting still, but we're actually moving, and the fantasies of phenomena are sliding through us like ideas through curtains."

Seeing in this meditative way generally brings about one of two responses. In the first place, it's very liberating. You start to see that all the patterns and emotions and thoughts that we were struggling with, that seemed so dense and impenetrable, are just all poofs—and that nothing is binding the mind. That's wonderfully freeing and uplifting and delightful and true.

And then we stay a little longer with that understanding, with that seeing, and we start to wonder: what's next? If none of those things are solid or can be held onto, where do I rest? Then it gets scary. But that's not the end of the journey. There's more to come.

Impermanence is revealed through our meditation practice, and it opens the door to these other two characteristics. Conditioned things are unsatisfactory because they're not solid. We can't hang on to them because they're not really lasting long enough to be clung to, when we understand them.

So what happens when we try to hold on? Well, either we take hold of something painful—like a difficult emotion or psychological pattern—and then there's pain right away. We're holding on to pain, so that's painful. Or if we hold on to something pleasant, like a beautiful state of meditation or concentration, if we hold on to that and cling, then we suffer when it goes. Either way, it's unsatisfactory. There's some suffering for us, some unhappiness, if we're clinging.

This is from Suzuki Roshi: "Without accepting the fact that everything changes, we cannot find perfect composure. But unfortunately, although it is true, it is difficult for us to accept it. Because we cannot accept the truth of transiency, we suffer. So the cause of suffering is our non-acceptance of this truth. The teaching of suffering and the teaching that everything changes are two sides of one coin."

These two characteristics are very closely related. The third, not-self, requires a little more investigation, and I'm just going to touch on it briefly. When you think about the idea of the I or the self that's at the center of our world—our world revolves around ourself—you start to realize there's an assumption of continuity that's intrinsic in the idea. If there wasn't, we wouldn't worry about dying, right?

If you thought it was somebody else who was going to die, no problem. But it's because we think it's *I* who am going to die that there's a problem. So that shows there's an assumption of continuity from who we are today to who we are up to the moment of death. It's this continuity that is questionable.

Let me put it more precisely. The assumption that there's any lasting entity in this mind-body process that will continue from now through every moment up until our moment of death is not accurate according to the Buddha's teaching. When we look at this changing flow of experience at all the six sense doors, we start to realize nothing stays constant from one moment to the next, let alone one year to the next or one decade to the next. There's nothing fixed in here that can be that solid "I" that's going to persist. That's why

impermanence also reveals this teaching on no lasting self in the middle of all this.

So how do we come into alignment with this? I don't know if any of you have seen the movie *Bedazzled* with Brendan Fraser. It's one of my favorites. He is in a pact with the devil, and it's based on the Faust myth. He gets to request the perfect life for seven different lifetimes, but every time he expresses the wish, he misses some vital element that makes it really miserable. In one life, he's a kind of debonair intellectual in New York City—a well-known author and something of a bon vivant. People are really attracted to him, and he's a philosopher with thoughts on the meaning of life. In one conversation, he says, "Why does the existential dilemma have to be so damn bleak? Yes, we're alone in the universe. Yes, life is meaningless and death is inevitable. But is that necessarily so depressing?"

I love that line. And in a way, it's very dharmic. Because if you look at people who have been contemplating the truth of this for a long time, there's generally a lot of lightness and joy in them.

There is this fact that the teaching on impermanence sounds at first like some bitter pill that we just have to swallow and kind of stoically accept and resign ourselves to. But that's not the point. The point is that this wisdom, this understanding, is a way to free the heart and mind. That's why the Buddha taught it. This is the doorway to our freedom.

Why? Because we learn not to hold on to what can't be held on to. We learn not to cling, and that non-clinging is freedom. It is freedom and it's a doorway to greater freedom, both. Ajahn Chah put it this way: if you let go a little, there's a little peace. If you let go a lot, there's a lot of peace. If you let go completely, there's complete peace. This is the pointer.

There's a beautiful chant in Pali that is chanted in Buddhist countries in Southeast Asia. You've probably heard this line: *Anicca vata sankhara*. It means "all conditioned things are impermanent." The chant goes on—it's very brief. It says: All conditioned things are impermanent. Their nature is to arise and pass away. To live in harmony with this truth brings the highest happiness.

This is where the happiness of the path points. Understanding the nature of conditioned things, not clinging—this is what frees the heart and mind to be here, to be present, to be light, to be open. It's a state of non-clinging that's the doorway.

This is from the Buddha: "When one establishes the perception of impermanence in all formations without exception, the mind inclines to complete peace."

So we need to carry on this work of perceiving impermanence again and again and again in all situations. It's not just one insight, but we need to see it over and over and over in every situation that comes our way. Then this quality of peace starts to become more evident.

I want to explore a little bit with you this quality of peace and whether it's a conditioned thing or not—or whether this quality of peace might be that link to the thing that's not conditioned, that dimension of the

unconditioned.

I'll start with silence. I think there are two ways to understand silence. One way is that it's when there aren't any sounds. This is a pretty quiet meditation hall. Sometimes there might not be any sounds and then you say, wow, it's really silent in here.

But there's another way that silence can be understood—as the context or the background from which all sounds come and go. Does that make sense? If you understand silence in this way, as the container of sounds, is that silence broken when a sound appears? Or is that context still there? That context is still there, isn't it? Can you tune into it sometimes, even when a sound is present? Can you feel the extent of that silence? If you practice, you can.

Now let's look at peace and activity. There's a way in which peace can be understood as the lack of activity—all activity is stopped. But there's another way that peace can be understood as the context within which activity happens. If we understand peace in this way, things can arise—sense experiences can arise, sensations, thoughts, even emotions. And if we learn, we can still tune into that peace that's the underlying context for all those arisings. That peace isn't being broken by the arising, just like the silence isn't really shattered by a sound.

So that peace isn't dependent on conditions. It doesn't matter if there's activity at the sense doors or not. That peace is still available, and we can tune into it at any moment, once we learn to. That is analogous to, it's a taste of, a foretaste of, it's very close to that unconditioned element that the Buddha was pointing to—that really, truly complete peace.

In our meditation, we can start to feel this. Things keep happening. Things are arising and passing, but we're not holding on. In that not holding on, we can feel that kind of deeper peace. And this is a quality of meditation that one teacher called "unentangled knowing." We're fully aware things are happening. We're not cutting off any sense experience, but we're still and unmoved on some fundamental level because we're not getting entangled in holding on to the comings and goings.

This place is free from suffering. It's free from unsatisfactoriness. There's nothing to complain about in that place of unentangled knowing. And this is the place we find refuge and safety. It can be found in any moment when we can tune to it. It's available in any moment. And we learn more and more how to find it, how to recognize it, how to rest there, how to come back to it. And that is our safety.

I'll close with this quotation from the Buddha. And just to mention again—that peace is not dependent on conditions. It's there regardless of the activity that is happening. Here's the quote:

"One who is dependent has wavering. One who is independent has no wavering. There being no wavering, there is calm. There being calm, there is no desire. There being no desire, there is no coming or going. There being no coming or going, there is no passing away or arising. There being no passing away or arising, there is neither a here nor a there nor an in-between. This, just this, is the end of suffering."

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