The Three Characteristics

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 57:49

I often ask people at the start of interviews, as a warm conversational gambit, "How's the retreat going?" Most people respond by telling me how the retreat's going. But every once in a while, the question just strikes someone dumb. They simply say, "Ah," because when you think about it, it's really a hard question to answer.

Usually it's been four days since I've seen somebody, and in those four days the retreat has gone every which way for people. It's difficult to edit your experience of four days down to one or two sentences to offer to a teacher. Of course, this problem gets compounded many times when you leave the retreat, whether it's three or six weeks later, and you go home. All the people who have missed you ask, "Gosh, how was your retreat?" How do you edit down three or six weeks of some of the most intense experience of your life into a conversational gambit?

So I want to give you a tip—this is the secret teaching. What I usually do is just say, "It was great." That's usually all they want to hear, so the conversation wraps up and we move on to the basketball scores or something like that.

The quickness of change in retreat is really one of its most striking features. Mental states come and go. The body feels good, then it feels bad. Energy is up one day, then we're sleepy the next—always in flux. This is sometimes frustrating, but the Buddha talked about it as one of the most important areas of learning in our whole lives.

When he described the way things are in this life—the nature of things—he talked about three characteristics of everything that exists, everything that comes into being. These three characteristics he described as impermanence, the quality of unsatisfactoriness or suffering, and the quality of selflessness or not-self that pertain to all things that arise. I think of these three as the facts of life for grownups. So given that we're all adults, this is a good topic for us to look into.

In Pali, these three are called *anicca* for impermanence, *dukkha* for unsatisfactoriness, and *anatta* for selflessness. These are the three qualities of things I'd like to look into tonight.

Regarding impermanence, the Buddha said, "Foremost among footprints is the elephant's. Foremost among reflections is that on impermanence." He considered it one of the highest areas to learn about in the whole realm of Dharma. So no matter what our experience is, if we tune into this simple truth, we can remind ourselves: whatever I'm experiencing, this too shall pass. The Buddha commented that there's great wisdom in that knowledge, in that reflection.

When we look at the world and what we as humans get up to in the world, it seems like we spend a lot of our time and energy trying to find some security. It's as though we recognize our vulnerability and look for some form of security, something lasting that we can rest upon in life. One of the main areas we look to is personal relationships. Often the sense is that if we get this part of our life together, it will solve a lot of problems.

This reminds me of a number of years ago when I went on an extended meditation retreat—a two-month period. I had a partner at that time who decided not to go on the retreat but chose instead to stay home and get involved with a spiritual scene near our home. There was this teacher operating very much in a guru style who demanded a lot of devotion and surrender.

I started the retreat, which was very much like this one—a silent retreat of sitting and walking. I entered with a great deal of confidence, thinking, "This relationship is really the bedrock of my life. This is the most solid thing in my life. I'm really grateful for it." I should have recognized there was a little red flag going up in my consciousness, but I didn't.

I completed the retreat, practicing quite intensively as you all are here. You're beginning to get a sense that you become a little sensitive in these settings. Little things that might just be a pebble dropping in the pond in outer life have huge ripples when your mind gets quieted down.

So like you, I came out of my two-month retreat very open, very vulnerable. I called my partner as I got out and asked, "How are you doing?" I found that she had become very involved in this other scene and had gone through a big surrender to this guru. When I heard that, my stomach started tying up in knots. I felt a huge wave of anxiety come over me because I had seen many couples get involved in this scene, and every time—whether one or both of them were really into it—the relationship had fallen apart. I've observed that scene over many years now, and that's still the case with that particular scene.

So as I started to realize what was going on, I felt like the bottom had fallen out of my life. Where there used to be a stomach, there was just a yawning abyss. I felt a huge amount of insecurity arise because this foundation of my life was being shaken. I didn't know if the relationship was going to survive this hurdle.

Looking at that scene, if you don't mind my being a little catty, I really believe there was an expectation from this guru that anyone in relationship with him would have no other love but him. I honestly believe that's why he forced people to cut away their relationships. I could see this in our future, could see us heading that way. And I felt very anxious for quite a while.

It was still some time before I was due to return home, and over that whole period, I just felt ungrounded, insecure, fearful, nervous. When I finally got home, we went through a lot of conversation, as you can imagine. I did a little bit of deprogramming, and my partner at the time decided to move away from the guru and basically reenter the Vipassana fold, which as you know is warm and friendly and completely non-threatening, very supportive of relationships. So we carried forward for some time longer.

But it was a really clear teaching to me of the impermanent nature of things—even something in which I had put a lot of faith and store. And also a real teaching about the attachment I had formed and how upsetting it was to have it questioned. It hadn't even gone away; it had just been questioned, and I felt like the bottom had fallen out.

So we look in many areas of our life to find some way to avoid feeling this kind of anxiety, to find security through relationship, through family, through our jobs, through friendships, through possessions, through having a nice home. In one way or another, we often spend enormous time trying to make sure those stay in some kind of order.

There's even a project that emerged in the 80s and 90s called "Getting My Life Together." It's become a new project because we have so many pieces we want to weave together—relationship, practice, being away for long periods of time hoping your partner's there when you get home, being away from work for long periods hoping there are still people who want to hire you when you return, family, children, and so on.

We're always hoping to put all these pieces together in some configuration where they'll snap into place and stay that way forever. I'll report from my own experience: it hasn't happened yet. There are many beautiful things happening in my life, and there's always something that seems a little out of balance.

A simple example: I started teaching in 1984 in England, moved to the States in 1988, and put teaching aside for five years while I worked in the corporate world. I worked for Microsoft—before they got hit with antitrust charges. I know there are many Apple lovers in the dharma community. It was after I left that it all went downhill.

I came back into teaching in 1994, about five years ago. Being a new teacher in the States, I felt incumbent to go to places the established teachers weren't so crazy about going, like North Dakota in the middle of February. I was accepting all invitations, and I found I was traveling too much, away from home too much, away from my relationship. It was exhausting.

Just in the last couple years, I've started cutting down on travel. Since Spirit Rock is now here, I'm looking forward to spending more time at home. Well, just as I'm becoming more of a homebody, my wife Sally is getting into the teacher training program with Jack Kornfield, and now she's going to be the one going to North Dakota in February and being away. Eugene is spiriting her off to St. Louis to teach with him in a couple of months.

So just as one part comes into balance, often another slips out. Putting it all together may never happen—another feature of impermanence. We have to learn to flow with these changing conditions all the time. And what better place than a retreat where conditions change as quickly as the weather? It's such a perfect metaphor for this retreat—one day rain, one day sun. One day rain, one day sun. It's really a great reminder.

One of the changing conditions that we all live with is the body and the aging that the body goes through. One of my friends started to go quite bald in his twenties, and it was a blow to his vanity. But he said actually the most difficult thing about it was that when he washed his face and got to his forehead, he didn't know where to stop.

For myself, balding hasn't been my problem, but the coloring has been my problem. This coloring started to go when I was about thirty-five, and I thought I was still quite a young man. I was at a gathering somewhere, and I got up and walked away, and the guy who was sitting next to us, who we didn't know, turned and asked my friend, "Oh, who was that man?" And she said, "What man?" And he said, "That middle-aged man who was sitting next to you."

I just couldn't believe it. Middle-aged at thirty-five. So I've been dealing with that one ever since, and now it sort of fits. It's okay. Dealing with the changes in the body.

And of course, we all know where those changes are heading. The Buddha talked about it often. Aging leads to illness, and illness leads to death. So in the Buddhist tradition, this reflecting on aging and death is really an integral part of the practice. In the Satipatthana Sutta, which is the cornerstone of our meditation practice, the Buddha gives a number of reflections that he offers to practitioners as an integral part of the practice—to reflect on their own body after death, to reflect on our own corpse in various stages of decomposition and decay. This awareness of our own mortality is really integral to the practice.

And you know, it's something that I think we need a little bit of encouragement to reflect on. You may have heard about this poll. They polled people in America and asked them what was the scariest thing in their lives or in their thoughts. Fear of death came in number four. Number one was speaking in public.

Now that could be a statement of great courage on the part of the American people. But I somehow suspect that it's more a function of deep denial—that we just aren't comfortable holding this thought of our own death. It's frightening. It's sad. It's something that as a culture we spend a lot of time avoiding.

I was doing a long personal retreat a couple of years ago, and this reflection came up really strongly for me. One of the things that I realized in thinking about this is that my own death seems accommodatable. It seems manageable. It seems holdable. But what really touched me was the reflection that at some point in the future, I will probably witness Sally's death, or Sally will be there witnessing my death. And that for me carried even more sadness than just the idea of my own dying.

The Buddha said that in many ways, death is like this great mountain that's rolling over the landscape toward us and obliterating everything in its wake. And he asked the question: what can one do in the face of this kind of situation, the oncoming inevitability of death? And his response was the only thing to do is to practice the Dharma, to live with as much calm as we can, and to do good. This is really the crux of life in the face of our death. Fortunately, you're in just the right place for this instruction.

The Tibetans say that impermanence has four ends: The end of birth is death. The end of coming together

is separation. The end of accumulation is dispersal, and the end of all building is destruction. We get so involved with all the things of this world and of our lives that sometimes we forget this.

This is from an ancient Indian sutra: Some children were playing beside the ocean. They made castles of sand, and each child defended his castle and said, "This one is mine." They kept their castles separate and would not allow any mistakes about which was whose. When the castles were all finished, one child kicked over someone else's castle and completely destroyed it. The owner flew into a rage, pulled the other child's hair, struck him with his fist, and bawled out, "He has spoiled my castle. Come along, all of you, and help me to punish him as he deserves." The others all came to his help.

They beat the child with a stick and then stamped on him as he lay on the ground. Then they went on playing in their sandcastles, each saying, "This is mine. No one else may have it. Keep away. Don't touch my castle."

But evening came. It was getting dark, and they all thought they ought to be going home. No one now cared what became of his castle. One child stamped on his. Another pushed his over with both hands. They turned away and went back, each to his home. And that night, the tide obliterated all traces.

So we look at the outer situation, seeing this fact of change and mortality, and realize that there isn't anything lasting to hold onto. And perhaps from that understanding, we come to meditation practice.

There's a terrific promise in meditation practice—the promise of release, of freedom. It's an interesting promise because our understanding of the end of meditation practice, which the Buddha called right understanding, one of the factors in the Eightfold Path, evolves as we practice. All the path factors develop as we practice the path. Right understanding evolves likewise.

When we come into meditation practice, we may think that the Third Noble Truth, which the Buddha expressed as the end of suffering lying in the end of craving, actually says that lasting happiness is found in the end of craving. When I came into practice, as Eugene said, confessing my delusions, I came looking for the security through meditation that I wasn't able to find through outer circumstances—thinking that I would find some way, some state of mind that I could put together through meditation that would last and keep me in a permanent state of happiness and well-being.

Actually, what the Third Noble Truth is pointing to is something a little more subtle. It's pointing to the end of suffering, but it doesn't say what form that takes. As time has gone on, I've come to feel that the Third Noble Truth is not pointing to a static mental state of unending happiness seen as a particular way of being, but rather to an equilibrium and a peacefulness that can be present in any form of experience.

So when I came in, I was definitely looking for a fixed kind of security through meditation. As I've practiced, my understanding of that has changed a bit.

Someone actually asked the Buddha, "For someone who is completely enlightened, do they dwell in a

perpetual state of well-being?" The Buddha said, "Of one who has become fully awakened, there is nothing by which they can be measured. There is no static state by which such a person can be defined."

In retreat, as we begin to explore, we see that we're really involved in a microcosm of life here. Just as our outer life has changed, the inner life here has also changed. Sounds, breath, thoughts, all coming and going. Emotions and states of mind rapidly changing.

One of the most interesting areas to open up, and several of you have talked about this in interviews, is looking closely at the experience of the body at this point in the retreat. Normally we take the body as something really solid. If there's anything that's going to be dependable and lasting and that we can count on, here it is—the body. We remember from our third grade health textbooks peeling off one layer to find the bones, peeling another layer to find the arteries and the internal organs, and it all seems very complete, very fixed.

But a curious thing happens when we actually explore with our awareness in the deepest intimacy that we can have with this body—we get a different picture. We start to touch the bare actuality of our physical nature and see that there is nothing solid in the experience, but rather just pulsing, changing vibrations, sensations, flux throughout this whole field.

This is a very liberating insight. We take the leg as something solid, but when we look closely, we see that all the sensations are just rapidly blinking on and off. There's nothing fixed here, but a whole field of change. Some people actually experience the body seeming to dissolve in a sitting, just held in the space of awareness.

Impermanence can also show itself in a project of trying to get our practice together or keep our practice together. I did this a lot in the early years when I was doing retreats. I would think that I couldn't really start to meditate until my body was free of pain, until it was clear of tension or knots or holding. So if I'd find an area that was tight in my body, I'd direct my attention there. Over time, I got somewhat skilled with some concentration, some mindfulness in bringing change into that sensation. If I could stay with it long enough, I could open it up. I could sort of tap into the vibratory nature. I'd work on that one and get it a little bit open. Then maybe there'd be another holding over here. So I'd go work on that for a while.

And after, you know, half a day or so, I'd actually experience some ease and flow and openness in the body. And then I could settle down and meditate. That would last about one sitting. The next sitting I'd come back and it would all have gone scrunch. It would all have contracted again. Why? Because the mind that caused contraction had never been really looked at. As long as the mind is going to contract around greed or aversion, the body will follow. I was trying to untangle the body without looking at the source, which is the mind. It was a very fleeting and temporary fix. I spent a lot of time doing it and I would have been a lot better advised to just live with some degree of tension and instead relax into the experience. It would have been a much smarter thing to do. It took me years to learn it, so I'm offering it to you as a shortcut.

The body keeps changing, goes from comfortable to uncomfortable. Nature is a great teacher about impermanence. The lovely thing about being in this setting is that you can spend a lot of time outdoors and let that truth of nature's change come into your bones. The Buddha really encouraged the nuns and monks to live simply in nature, to live close to nature, because then the teachings of change just come into our marrow. We see in nature how the clouds are always coming and going, the planets are shifting, the phases of the moon we stay in touch with when we're on a retreat like this. Whereas in city life, we might go weeks and not even know what phase the moon is in. We see life and death living close to nature.

We were practicing here in November, the old students retreat. And one evening during the dharma talk, there was this heart-wrenching scream from outside. We didn't know what it was, but when we went to look later, there was a dead deer. It had apparently been attacked by a dog or a pair of dogs that had gotten onto the land. It was a small deer, and by the time we reached it, it was already dead. Probably its neck had been broken. It was a young deer. So a number of us gathered around and sent it metta for a while. After doing that, a lot of people came by and looked at the deer and reflected on its passing, sent metta. Then it was moved out of the retreat area.

Actually, the Humane Society was supposed to come pick it up. The caretakers moved it so they could come pick it up, and they never came. So over the next days, you could actually observe what was happening to the deer's body, and it disappeared in fairly short order. There are a lot of vultures here, as you may have noticed. The birds with the really big wingspans that you see around a lot, circling and gliding—they look like hawks from a distance, but in fact almost all of them are turkey vultures. They're eaters of dead flesh, carrion eaters. The way you can tell a turkey vulture is that its wings go up in kind of a V, whereas hawks' wings are much more horizontal when they fly or glide. So most of the big birds you see circling here are actually vultures.

So the vultures had done their work at picking apart the flesh of the deer, and we also have coyotes near here, and they were visiting and eating parts of the deer. So in a relatively short period of time, that deer's body was just gone. It was one of the teachings of nature that everything that comes into existence really does pass away. It's not the case that that deer is hanging out somewhere in what we call the past. That deer was here and now she's really gone.

One of my Tibetan teachers told me that a sign in your meditation that you're seeing clearly is that you're in touch with this facet of change. This is something you can actually tune into in a period of sitting. As you're with the breath, as you're with sounds, as you're with sensations, as you're with thoughts, are you sensing the nature of change, the arising and passing in that moment? Or have you concretized something? Have you made a fixation, a solid viewpoint or perspective out of a fantasy, a memory, a plan for the future, some fixation of concept? Look closely and see which you're in touch with.

If we're in touch with the changing nature of things, we're in touch with things as they are, at least to some very important degree. When we get fixated in concepts, past and future, we lose touch with that quality

of change. When we look closely in our practice, we see that all our experience is just arising and passing moment after moment after moment. This is really one of the key insights in meditation. This is one of the reasons that we really

In the tradition of Buddhist practice, this teaching suggests that you develop a stability of attention so that you can open to this perception of change in a very clear way. We can see change in our daily life—it's almost an intellectual perception. But in meditation, when we can really still the mind and see this moment-by-moment arising and passing, it hits us in a much deeper way.

This is why we stress some precision in paying attention to changing objects. It's not just breath watching, it's not just body watching, but it's in order to see the nature of things—to see the true nature of all the appearances.

When I was practicing in Thailand, I spent quite a bit of time at Ajahn Buddhadasa's monastery in the south of Thailand. Ajahn Buddhadasa was really one of the great masters of the last fifty years in Thailand. He died a few years ago. He was a meditator, he was a scholar, he was an iconoclast. He didn't do things in the traditional way.

Typically in Thailand, the style of Buddhism is very devotional—a lot of statues, a lot of candles, a lot of incense, a lot of bowing, a lot of prayer, a lot of chanting. Ajahn Buddhadasa wasn't interested in that side of the Dharma. He was really only interested in wisdom. His teaching and his whole monastery was set up just for wisdom.

Rich donors would come along and say, "I'd like to give you a big gold Buddha statue. Where could we put it?" He'd say, "We don't take statues here, I'm sorry." He did not have a single statue of the Buddha in the whole monastery. The only thing he had was a semicircle where the monks would gather to eat their morning meal—it was a one-meal-a-day kind of place. In the center of that semicircle there were three stones piled on top of each other that sort of suggested a pyramid. That was the closest approximation to a Buddha image that he would allow.

I appreciated his teaching greatly, and during the time we were there, there were about half a dozen of us Westerners. He spoke pretty good English, and we got to meet with him once a week for teachings that he would give to us in English. It was really wonderful to hang out with him. He had a great deal of spaciousness, a great deal of kindness.

We had been with him for some weeks, and this was the last week of our teachings. This is what he told us to do. He said there are these bases for sense contact. There are the six senses—the five senses of the body: sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch, and the sense door of the mind, which in Buddhism is considered the sixth sense.

For sight, for example, for a sight to arise, you have to have an eye that's working—you have to have a sense organ. You have to have a form, something out there that can be seen, and you have to have

consciousness. You have to have the vitality of a living body to have eye consciousness. When these three come together—the consciousness, the form, and the working eye sense organ—then a sight can arise.

These are the three bases related to sight: the organ, the object, and the consciousness. These three bases are also there in each of the other five senses. So we have six senses, three bases in each. That makes eighteen of these sense bases, which are called the *ayatanas*—it just means sense bases.

He said, "Every time you experience something in any one of the six senses, I want you to look at the three *ayatanas*, the three sense bases for that experience. And I want you to understand the origin—what conditions caused that. Nothing comes out of nothing. Everything arises because of prior conditions. So take a look so that you start to understand these things came out of prior conditions. Notice the moment of arising. Notice its persistence. Notice its passing away."

So we had eighteen sense bases and we had four things to notice in relation to each one. When you go through your experience in that level of detail, everything that can come into your consciousness can be examined in that way. You become very clear. Everything we experience is of the nature to arise and to pass away. You really know there's nothing fixed, nothing fixed that we can apprehend with our senses anywhere.

When the truth of this degree of impermanence starts to dawn, it can be a little bit unsettling.

You may feel that this is a terrible tragedy, or you may feel this is wonderful. Many of you know Wes Nisker, who teaches here—one of our teachers and also an author and former radio personality. Wes has a lovely daughter who is now about twenty or twenty-one years old. She grew up in a dharma household where both parents were deeply involved in the practice.

When she was fourteen—very precocious—she asked her mother about a word she'd been hearing around the house. "Mom, this word 'duality' you guys are always talking about—is duality good or bad?" We could ask the same question about impermanence: Is it good or bad?

Well, it's not really either. It's simply the way things are—the truth of the way things are.

In relation to the hindrances, impermanence is actually something quite wonderful. When the hindrances arise, you never really have to do anything with them except pay attention. In time, every one of them will pass away. This offers tremendous freedom because you realize you can feel anything. You can open yourself to experience any of the difficulties—wanting, aversion, dullness, restlessness, or doubt—and you don't even have to do anything. Of themselves, they will pass away.

This understanding gives great freedom. You don't have to hold yourself back.

I'd like to read a poem from Rainer Maria Rilke. He wrote a book of poems with a deeply religious orientation when he was in his early twenties. This particular poem imagines God shaping the human being and offering advice before the human being leaves the field of creation and journeys into life:

*God speaks to each of us as he makes us,
then walks with us silently out of the night.

These are the words we dimly hear:

You, sent out beyond your memory,
go to the limits of your longing.
Embody me.

Flare up like flame
and make big shadows I can move in.

Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror.
Just keep going. No feeling is final.
Don't let yourself lose me.

Nearby is the country they call life.
You will know it by its seriousness.

Give me your hand.*

"Let everything happen to you. Just keep going. No feeling is final." This captures the essence of our practice. You can keep going with your awareness without worrying that you'll get caught or stuck anywhere, because the feelings will continue to change.

We see that throughout the entire field of our experience—mental, physical, internal, external—there's nothing really to hold onto. Everything arises and passes away very quickly.

Ananda, who was the Buddha's cousin and attendant for many years, once asked the Buddha, "You speak of this thing called 'the world.' What do you mean by world?" In Pali, the term for world is *loka*, sometimes translated as realm—this realm we're living in, this earth we inhabit.

The Buddha responded with a pun on the word *loka*. He said, "It disintegrates"—and the Pali word for disintegrates is *paloka*—"therefore it is called the world." This is the nature of what we're living in: a realm that is constantly disintegrating, constantly dissolving. This is why there's no fixed security.

The Buddha offered an analogy: Our situation is like a man being swept away by a river, caught in the current, flowing swiftly downstream. As he's carried along, he keeps reaching up to the bank, trying to grab hold of a clump of grass. But because the current is so strong and the grass so weak, the grass simply pulls out in his hand and he's swept further downstream. Then he grabs another piece of grass, but it too pulls out, and he continues being swept away.

This is our situation when we're clinging, when we're trying to hold onto changing phenomena for security.

Joseph Goldstein once said this point in practice is like jumping out of an airplane and realizing you don't have a parachute. It can be deeply unsettling.

So if we continue looking for happiness in things to hold onto, we're bound to suffer. You can see this very simply in the microcosm of sitting practice. If we come in and sit and have a difficult sitting, the suffering is immediate. The pain is immediate. We want something pleasant to happen, but something painful is occurring. There's disappointment. If you have a good sitting and go out wanting it to happen again, there will probably be disappointment when the quality of the next sitting changes. So if we have direct pain, it's suffering. If we have pleasure and want to repeat it, eventually it becomes suffering as well.

Ajahn Chah said it's like grabbing a snake, this quality of clinging. If you grab onto the head of the snake and it bites you, that's pain. If you grab onto the tail of the snake and hold on, in a very short time the head swings around and bites you—that's pain too.

The Pali word for this quality is *dukkha*, usually translated as suffering, sometimes as unsatisfactoriness, sometimes as unreliability. The world is unreliable because it cannot give us the security we're seeking. This is really our dilemma as human beings—we all have a deep yearning for security, for safety, for a happiness that isn't temporary or transient. Yet the world isn't capable of giving us that. The objects of this world cannot provide that.

This recognition can actually bring up a lot of compassion, because it's our shared situation. It's the predicament each one of us faces. In meditation practice, we start to see that there's no state of mind we can construct that will last in this way.

But something very interesting emerges: in any moment when we let go of clinging in its forms of greed, aversion, and confusion, in that very moment of letting go, we find there's a peace available. That kind of peace may not be temporary. Perhaps that peace is like a foundation for all our experience, available anytime we're not disturbing it. And if so, perhaps that peace is not subject to arising and passing.

Let's set that aside for a moment and talk about the last of the three characteristics of existence: not-self, or *anatta*. Basically, the Buddha said the root question in spiritual practice is finding the answer to: What am I? Who am I?

To look at this question freshly, we probably need to examine what we commonly mean by the word "I." It's a word we use every day. When you stop to think about it, don't you have a sense that there's some way you've been constant from when you were very young until today? That there's a way the same person went to kindergarten on that opening day when you had to leave your mother for the first time, right up to now as you sit in this hall?

This word "I," if you look into it a little, comes with a sense of continuity—an ongoing sameness to who we are. Even though our bodies have changed, our thoughts have changed, our moods have changed, we have some sense of an ongoing center through all those changes. That's the self the Buddha said needs

questioning—this ongoing center. Is there such a thing? This is something that really needs investigation in each of our meditation practices.

One way the Buddha described this inquiry: Does the sense of "I" ever arise by itself, or does it only arise in relation to other things? In other words, pain comes in this thing we call a knee. Then arises: "I have pain in my knee," or "my knee hurts," or "I'm in pain." A thought comes about what we want to do after the retreat, and the "I" gets formed: "I want to go there. I want to do that. I want to see that person." A mood of sadness or happiness comes: "I'm sad. I'm happy."

So an interesting area to investigate: when these experiences come—knee pain, sadness, thoughts about the future—can there just be the pain? Can there just be the sadness? Can there just be the thought without someone who owns it? Experience for yourself in practice the difference between simply noting pain and noting when you call it "my pain." When you think "future thought" versus "my future thought." When you think "anger" or "happiness" versus "my anger" and "my happiness." The "my," the Buddha said, is actually something extra. It's not intrinsic to the experience.

It's something we generate out of our own thoughts. What's the experience like if there's just the anger? Just the knee pain, just the feeling. This is clear seeing. The sense of identification of joining it with an "I" is something extra. The clear seeing is just to see the thing itself as it is.

When we see in that way, we start to get a sense there's actually no one at the center of all this. There's no ongoing entity in here, or behind the eyes to whom this is all happening. What we are is just the changing process of our six senses, all the facets arising and passing moment after moment. There's no solid ongoing center that it's all happening to.

After a talk on impermanence at a retreat in the desert, one of the meditators asked the next day, "Is this just a bitter pill that we're supposed to swallow? Why do you tell us all this stuff? This is not very good news."

Actually, there are two levels of the answer to that. The first answer is no, it's not just a bitter pill. It's actually very freeing to see impermanence. The Buddha said that if you see impermanence over and over again, it leads to the end of craving, it leads to the end of ignorance, and it leads to the end of the conceit "I am," or the belief that I am something or other. The point in talking about all these three is really to encourage us, to inspire us not to cling. Clinging is more to the heart of things. These are all pointers or ways of looking at the mind that doesn't cling.

In fact, this mind that doesn't cling is very closely related to that peace that I mentioned a few minutes earlier—that peace that may not be subject to arising and passing, that peace that may be a kind of baseline or foundation or ground for our experience. When the mind is not involved in clinging, see what your experience is. See if it has this quality of peacefulness to it.

When there's no clinging to the breath, nor to the sensations in the body, nor to the mood or state of mind,

and yet there's a fullness of presence—there's a fullness of awareness that's not of past and future—in that very moment, is there any suffering? Is there any conflict? Is there any problem?

This opening into the realm of non-clinging is really what's being pointed to by these three characteristics. The three characteristics themselves are not an ultimate truth. It's so precise the way the Buddha phrased it. These are the characteristics or the qualities of existence—that means that which comes into existence. But any kind of ultimate truth has to encompass existence as well as non-existence. Just as in this room, nothing would be possible if it weren't for the space that's between us all. The space is every bit as important as the appearances or those things that exist at this moment in the room. So impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self are really pointers to this dimension of non-clinging in which something more ultimate can be discovered.

I did a session once with a great Zen master named Sasaki Roshi. And one of the koans he posed during that retreat is, "How do you catch the wind?" I don't think he was a big Donovan fan, but it was a great koan. How do you catch the wind?

I never actually got a chance to give him my answer to this koan, but my first inclination was something like this: grasping empty air. But you know, that's what we're doing all the time. We're grasping empty passing appearances. I realized he would have just shooed me out of the room and rung his bell and dismissed me.

And when I thought about it later, the gesture that came to me was this: the way that a sail catches the wind by being fully open, by being fully outstretched, by having an awareness that embraces the arisings as well as the space that contains all the arisings. That space of non-clinging is a space that can't be harmed because nothing has contracted into a small self that can be threatened. This is the sense of emptiness: an open awareness fully present that embraces all the appearances. And in this, it's as though we've jumped out of the plane. We realize we don't have a parachute, but we also know there's no ground to fall into.

This is from the Diamond Sutra: "Thus shall you think of all this fleeting world, like a star at dawn, a bubble in a stream, a flickering lamp, a flash of lightning in a summer cloud, an echo, a mirage, a dream."

When we can hold this dreamlike nature of the world with full awareness and full presence, there's a terrific freedom in that experience. The Buddha put it this way: our experience is empty and insubstantial to one who sees it wisely.

So should this body and mind be looked upon by a practitioner with strong energy, continually aware, clearly aware and mindful. Let them leave behind all bondage, make a refuge for herself, and, as though her head was on fire, act to gain the deathless Nibbana.

This is the invitation before us—to practice with the urgency and dedication as if our very life depended upon it, because in the deepest sense, it does. Not the preservation of this temporary form, but the

awakening to what is truly deathless within us.

The Buddha speaks of acting "as though her head was on fire"—this is the quality of energy and commitment that spiritual awakening requires. It's not a casual interest or a hobby we pursue when convenient. It's recognizing the precious nature of this human birth, the rarity of encountering the dharma, and the fleeting nature of the opportunity before us.

When we truly understand the dreamlike nature of all phenomena, when we see through the illusion of solid, permanent existence, we don't become passive or disconnected. Quite the opposite—we become more present, more engaged, more fully alive. We act with the wisdom that nothing is permanent, and therefore every moment matters infinitely.

This is the paradox of the spiritual path: the more clearly we see the insubstantial nature of all things, the more precious and vivid life becomes. Like lucid dreamers who, knowing they are dreaming, can move through the dream with complete freedom and joy.

Let's sit for just a minute in the silence that holds all of this—the emptiness that is not vacant but vibrantly alive, the awareness that needs no ground to stand on because it is itself the very space in which all experience unfolds.

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