The Three Characteristics

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 55:38

I asked somebody in an interview today, "How's the retreat going for you?"

They looked really perplexed. I could see the wheels stirring as they went back over the events of the day. Finally, they said, "That's a really hard question to answer. It's kind of been going every which way."

I could really relate to that. I want to pass on a tip: when you get home, you're going to get this question a lot. How was your retreat? You can imagine the wheels stirring as you prepare to speak to people at home. So I have an insider piece of advice—you just say, "It was great." That's all people want to know, and you can go on to the next topic about what's been happening for them.

The reason it's so hard to answer is that it's always changing. Our experience is always changing. It's one of the most striking things about a retreat and something we see early on. It's actually one of our first insights in practice, which is good because this is called insight meditation. You feel you ought to be having some insights or you wouldn't be getting your money's worth. At least you get that insight out of this.

The Buddha talked a lot about this aspect of change. He actually said, "Foremost among footprints is the elephant's. Foremost among reflections is that on impermanence." It was a really key part of his teaching. He came back to it again and again. He often combined it with two other aspects that he called the three characteristics of existence: impermanence, unsatisfactoriness—sometimes called suffering—and not-self, or selflessness.

In tonight's talk, I'd like to go into these three areas of the Buddha's teachings in more detail. I sort of think of these as the facts of life for grown-ups. They're sometimes a little hard to take in, but if we want to be an adult in this world, it's really important that we understand these facts. The Buddha stressed them again and again.

I think we all grow up with a sense of vulnerability. We look at the world and see the turmoil in it. Every human being, from adolescence on, is plagued with a sense of some insecurity. Where in all this confusion am I going to find lasting happiness? How is this going to work for me? What will we find that lasts?

Of course, the culture gives us a set of answers: lots of money, good job, handsome or attractive partner, big car, lots of gadgets—the latest of all that. I think all of us are here because we already know that doesn't really do it. We may have tried it, but I think all of us know that's not where it's at.

I think we often still look outside ourselves—I know I have. One of the areas we look to a lot is an intimate

relationship. There's a tendency to put a lot of eggs in that basket.

I didn't really realize this until I was on a long retreat. It was a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away. I went away on a two-month retreat and left my girlfriend at our home. When I got to the retreat, I thought, "That relationship is so solid. I know I can completely count on that relationship. I don't have a single worry as I go into this retreat."

That should have been the tip-off, but I did not heed that call.

I went into the retreat and practiced for two months. I got quite still, quite open, quite raw. I came out at the end of the retreat and called my girlfriend as soon as we could talk again. I found out that she'd gotten involved while I was away in a spiritual scene where the guru basically broke up every single relationship that came into the scene. In hindsight, what I suspect—what I believe—is that this guru couldn't allow students to have a love relationship with anyone else. It was too divided.

I saw the handwriting on the wall as soon as she told me that, and I just felt the bottom fall out of my world.

And all the time that I was reflecting on this particular attachment, I kept thinking about how the meditator's path is often a progression from one attachment to another until we see through the whole process.

My stomach just went empty and hollow. And I'd been in retreat for two months, so you can imagine how sensitive we become when we sit for extended periods. The next few weeks were filled with turmoil and spinning and insecurity. What it revealed was the depth of attachment I had to that relationship at that point. It was a crystal clear lesson. It's not that I shouldn't have been in the relationship, but I didn't realize how much I had invested in it until the bottom fell out.

In case you're interested in how the story unfolds, we did reconcile. Essentially, she left that scene, which I believe was the only way our relationship could move beyond that hurdle. But for me, it felt like deprogramming. There was something occult-like about the atmosphere in that particular spiritual community. So there was considerable turmoil as everything got sorted out. That was a long, long time ago. Sometimes we learn the hard way.

Another place where we easily invest our sense of security is in this body. Many years ago, I started to go gray. When I was in my early thirties, I began to develop gray hair. At one gathering with a friend, somebody turned to him and asked—I couldn't hear clearly—"Who's that middle-aged man you're with?" I was genuinely offended and shocked. The aging process was happening, but I hadn't quite caught up with the reality of it yet.

Now, as this baby boomer generation advances, we were discussing in an interview today all the bad knees and bad backs and bad hips. A good friend of mine had hip replacement surgery last year. It's

becoming increasingly apparent that we witness this nature of the body—change, impermanence, aging, and illness.

One of the most compelling stories in the tradition of someone who had everything and yet wasn't satisfied is King Asoka. He ruled in India about two hundred years after the Buddha's death. He had inherited his kingdom from his grandfather, who was an emperor. Asoka was an extremely warlike king whose aim was to conquer all the surrounding territories.

He had engaged in one particularly bloody battle with a neighboring kingdom and emerged victorious. The day after the battle, he was walking around the battlefield, surveying the terrain he had conquered. He was appalled by the death and carnage and the bloody bodies strewn across the battlefield. This scene led him to reflect on all the greed that had spurred his conquests and how it had left him feeling.

As he stood in the middle of this misery, a Buddhist monk walked across the battlefield. The monk possessed such serenity and radiance, even amidst all the carnage, that the king was completely struck by his presence and taken with his appearance. Asoka said to himself, "How is it that I have everything and I'm miserable, while this monk has nothing and he's so happy, so radiant, so serene?"

At that moment, Asoka converted to Buddhism. In embracing the dharma, he genuinely adopted dharmic principles and attempted to rule his kingdom in accordance with them. He stopped the animal sacrifices, began tolerating all the religions present at that time, supported the sangha of monks and nuns, and ceased making war. He encouraged charity throughout his kingdom—for the people, for religious mendicants. His reign is remembered as one of the golden ages in Indian history, this rule of righteousness by someone who had possessed everything material yet remained miserable.

In Tibetan Buddhism, they teach that impermanence has four inevitable conclusions: The end of accumulating is dispersing. The end of building is destruction. The end of gathering is separation. The end of living is death.

This is, of course, inevitable. The Buddha strongly recommended a daily reflection on the fact of our own death. We have such a pronounced tendency to deny this reality, especially in our culture.

But worldwide, it's a human tendency not to believe in our own death. So one of the monks' reflections, ten daily reflections, goes like this: "I reflect that I am of the nature to die. I have not gone beyond death. I will eventually be parted from all that is dear and beloved to me."

We see this here as we get close to nature, too. Sometimes we see the death of lizards or frogs or insects on the ground. We had a dramatic one a couple of years ago. James and I were teaching here in November, and I happened to be giving the talk one evening at about this time. In the middle of the talk, there was this blood-curdling scream from outside. I didn't know what it was, but everybody in the hall sort of sat bolt upright. What's going on? It sounded like a young child screaming at the top of their lungs. So a couple of the staff people went out to see. After the talk, we went out also to see.

What had happened is a deer had gotten killed. Apparently, it had been attacked by a couple of dogs because they had attacked it at the neck and broken its neck. It was a small deer, not even a year old, just over by Mudita, the third residence hall. By the time we got there, it was already dead. So we did some loving kindness practice for it and tried to ease its passage, if that's possible. These things, of course, happen in nature. Being in the middle of nature, these things happen around us.

We called the SPCA, and they said they would come and take the body away. The caretakers actually dragged it down to the front of the property so the SPCA could take it, but they never came. What was very interesting is that that carcass was down there for the next week. Every day, it looked different. Every day, a little more of it was gone because the vultures and the coyotes would come and eat at it. In about a week, there wasn't much left that was recognizable as a deer. There were some flaps of hide and the bones, but all the flesh had been picked clean by the visitors who feed on that.

It was a really impactful reflection and meditation because it was a reminder of what will happen to our bodies also. That same state is what these bodies will come to at some time in the future. As the Buddha said, the fact of that is for certain, but the time of it is completely unknown. It could be tomorrow. It could be ten, twenty, thirty years from now. But it will happen for all of us.

We encourage this reflection not in order to get depressed or get morbid, but because this reflection can be a real waking up to our limited time period. Our time on this earth is really quite short. Especially as I get older, I notice how quickly each new year goes. I don't have that much time left. So it's an incentive to spend it wisely.

But something else the Buddha said I find very interesting. He said that there are people who fear death. He said someone who fears death does so for one of four reasons: they either have a strong desire for sense pleasures, they have a craving for this body, they have not done good deeds in this life, or they have doubt about the Dharma, about the truth of things.

Conversely, he said, people who don't have those four qualities do not fear death. Those who do not strongly desire sense pleasures, who don't have a craving for the body, who have done good acts, and who have confidence in the Dharma, he said, don't fear death and have no need to fear death.

I take this as an interesting point because in our culture we often think death is something horrible. When we look from a spiritual view, it's a part of life. How could birth be great and death be bad? They're both integral to life. If we think life is OK, that means birth is OK and death is OK.

So we see that life consists of these moments of sense experience: sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, thought, emotion. Does it really matter if we have one more moment or 100,000 more moments? In any case, death is going to be there at some point.

So we come to meditation as another way to deal with this kind of existential crisis of life. This is a real dilemma. We realize that external things can't ultimately bring happiness. And I think as we come to

meditation, most of us—I know I was—are looking for some lasting state of mind that would bring happiness. There must be a way to get a permanent kind of euphoria from this practice, a permanent kind of exhilaration, a permanent up, a permanent high. This was really, when I look back, more my expectation in the beginning than the goal of freedom.

But of course, as we practice, our intention and understanding changes. And we start to see that what really brings happiness of the deepest kind, as Sharda mentioned the other evening, is a purified heart. It's not outer experiences. It's also not a particular inner experience. But when the heart becomes free of the forces of greed, of hatred, and of confusion, then that itself is a happy state, a contented state, a peaceful state.

So we come into the retreat situation, and we come upon this fact of change, this constancy of change, just like in our outside life. Retreat is just a microcosm of that life. Sounds are coming and going. The breath is coming and going. Thoughts arise and persist and pass. And then we start to investigate the change in the body.

This is a really interesting point in practice. We see that the sensations change. Sometimes the body's comfortable, and sometimes it's not. Can you control that? Can you come into a sitting and say, "Body, be comfortable. Body, be free of pain." We really can't, can we? The change is going on, but it's not under our jurisdiction. It's not under our control.

I tried to do this a lot in my early years in practice. It sounds silly, but I did. I spent many, many hours on the cushion trying to make my body comfortable. And you've probably seen that as you generate some awareness, you can loosen up the energy in a part of the body. So if I felt tense or tight, I'd put the attention there and I'd try to loosen up the energies, get it flowing and become unblocked. My ideal was to become unblocked, completely free-flowing sensation.

So I'd spend most of the day becoming unblocked. And I'd have about thirty minutes of this free-flowing sensation. I'd go out to walk. I'd come back. And it all would have contracted up again. So I'd start the process all over, working on unblocking, working to get comfortable in the body. It was a waste of time. It was a waste of time.

I wasn't practicing mindfulness. I was practicing greed and aversion. I don't like the way the body feels now. I want it to feel differently. I'm going to make it happen. I would have been much, much better off if I'd just let the mind settle in some kind of equanimity in relation to the discomfort. The mind has the capacity to bear physical discomfort. Finally, after years, I found that out. I could have saved myself a lot of wrong effort. That's why I'm sharing it with you—if I can spare you some of those hours.

And we start to investigate more closely. We can't control pain. We can't control pleasure. So we look into the nature of sensations more closely. And the question at some point becomes really interesting: Is there anything solid in this whole field of physical experience?

As we get in touch with the actual nature of sensations in the body, despite all the anatomy textbooks we may have seen—we may have seen that you open it up and there's solid stuff in there, there's bones and liver and intestines and spleen and

and all that stuff. But apart from all the pictures, as awareness penetrates the body and becomes as intimate as we can with the body, take a look and see. Is it solid? Is there anything solid? You can take a look right now in your experience. Or is there only the quality of flickering, pulsation, vibration, tingling, coming and going, pulsing on and off?

We look at the leg, and it seems like a solid thing. But when we send the awareness there, we can feel just this play, this dance of sensations that's always changing. Somebody today mentioned in an interview that their body had basically gone away during part of the meditation. Couldn't feel the body. The mindfulness was strong. The concentration was strong. The sense of the body just was not there for them. Is it a solid thing? Or is it just flickers of sensing?

We start to investigate the mind, and we see too how changeable all the patterns of mind are. James talked about the different weather patterns that move through. One sitting, we're calm and present. The next sitting, it's very stormy, and we can't settle for more than a few seconds on any object. The next sitting, it might be dull. The next sitting, there might be a lot of happiness.

The Buddha actually said, if you're going to identify with anything, it's much better to identify with the body than the mind, because at least the body stays more constant. He said the mind changes so fast, don't try to make a constancy out of that. No point.

And with the mind states, are they controllable? Can you come in and decide to have a concentrated sitting? Can you come in and decide to be present with the breath for ten minutes? Can you come in and decide to experience joy? Can you come in and decide not to feel restless? The mind also is ungovernable due to this fact of constant change.

One great teaching of this lesson, as Sharda mentioned also, is proximity to nature. Because you see this message carried out again and again in nature. The death of the deer was one example. The changing weather patterns are another example. If you're outside, you're almost always aware of change. Changing sounds, change in the wind or the breeze, change of light and shadow. So the Buddha always advised the meditators to go out, sit at the foot of a tree, sit in a cave, sit in a clearing, in a grove, and feel that change of nature.

I spent the better part of a year in forest monasteries in Thailand, living very close to nature, living out in a very small and not particularly well-insulated hut. And living in that kind of proximity, you really feel this in your bones, how nature's always changing. Sometimes even these beautiful natural settings change due to nature.

I was doing a three-month retreat recently in a little hut in the north of Thailand. And I was right by a

beautiful little creek that went down the middle of this canyon. It's at the base of a high canyon with walls on both sides covered with tropical foliage and trees. And it was a very beautiful sound from this little stream.

But I'd committed to go to another monastery and leave the one I was in. And I was really getting settled in, and I thought, this is really a mistake. I shouldn't be leaving such a good situation. The food is good. It's quiet. I have the best hut in the place. The brook is beautiful. The cliffs are fantastic. I got really agitated. I shouldn't be leaving.

And then the rainy season hit. And all of a sudden, my quiet little brook started to fill up with water. And it became this roaring river all day and all night. The sound was deafening.

So my tranquility was taken away due to the change of nature. That itself wouldn't have been so bad, but then the stream started to play an old Bob Dylan song. All I could hear in the sound of the stream was "Subterranean Homesick Blues." And I discovered that I actually remembered every single verse of the song—and I'm going to spare you from the recital of them. But at that point, it was time to go to the other monastery. The conditions had changed.

This teaching of impermanence through nature is a really powerful one. I encourage you sometime in your sitting career to try sitting outside and get that feeling. You can sit outside on a bench, on the ground, eyes closed or eyes open—it doesn't really matter. Connect with your usual meditation object, connect with the breath, and then open your senses to nature and see what comes through, because the teaching is really there.

One of my teachers said a really good way to check if you're in touch with reality is: Can you tune into impermanence in that moment? Are you aware of change in that moment? If you are, then you're in touch with the truth of the moment. You can check that out.

So as we look really deeply with this steady mind that the retreat can bring, we start to see that every aspect of our experience is changing—not just from one sitting to another, but really changing in each moment. Moment after moment, things are arising and passing away. This is one of the most important areas in practice to investigate. Given the kind of stillness and steadiness of attention that you can find here, turn it to investigate in that direction. Start to look at what James mentioned this morning, and I think coming at something Sharda had said: look at the beginnings of things, look at the endings of things. Breath, sounds, thoughts, emotions, body sensations. Start to become aware of that play of life.

One of the forest monasteries where I was staying, the teacher was Ajahn Buddhadasa, who was one of the great Thai masters of the last fifty years. He's now dead. Franz also spent quite a bit of time at that monastery. While I was there, we were lucky that we were able to have teachings every week for one period, one part of the retreat, directly from Ajahn Buddhadasa, who spoke good English. He'd give us a different theme every week and then a new one. One week was our last meeting with him, and he gave us

a theme that I think could last probably the rest of our lives.

So here's the teaching that he said to investigate. It's a little complicated, so I want to take a little time, but I hope you'll stay with me.

If we look at a sense like the sense of sight, the Buddha said there are three pieces to seeing. He said the eye has to be working—there has to be a good sense organ. There has to be an object out there for us to see. And there has to be consciousness that can receive that sight. A corpse can't see. Someone who's blind can't see because the sense organ isn't working. A corpse can't see because the factor of consciousness has gone. If it's dark in the room, you can't see because the object isn't illuminated. So sight depends on the organ, the object, and the consciousness. There are these three elements for the sense of seeing.

As people, we have six senses in the Buddhist view: sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and the mind is considered the sixth sense—the qualities of thought, emotion, ideas, and so on. So with these six senses and three elements in each sense, there are eighteen different elements. Is that clear so far? Six times three. I know you're slowed down, but I just want to make this clear. Eighteen elements called dhatus. In the Pali, the term is dhatu.

So Ajahn Buddhadasa said for each of these elements, every time you contact it, investigate five things about it: its arising, its passing, its pleasure or potential for pleasure, its potential for suffering, and how to be free in relation to it—the possibility of freedom in relation to it. So the arising, the passing, potential for pleasure, potential for suffering, and potential for freedom. Eighteen times five is ninety.

So we essentially have ninety different ways to investigate impermanence and, within impermanence, the possibility of suffering or freedom in relation to each of them. This is a practice that could occupy you for the rest of the retreat, probably for a lot longer than that. You don't have to take it on, but I mention it as one of the possibilities—to see impermanence on that steady or constant level with every aspect of our experience.

So we start to see that nothing in our experience is exempt from this process of arising and passing moment by moment. And we start to see that there's nothing really fixed in this whole world. Everything is coming and going, every part of our experience.

When we first start to get a sense for this, this can feel a little unsettling. It's a little bit like the rug's been pulled out from under us, because we like security, we like constancy. So is this a good thing or a bad thing, this impermanence?

One of our friends is married to another practitioner, and they had a daughter who's one of these precocious, beautiful Dharma kids. When she got to be about fourteen, she'd been hanging out around Dharma language for a long time. And one day she came to her mother and she said, "Mom, is dukkha good or bad?" We could say the same thing about impermanence. Is it good or bad? Or maybe it doesn't fall in those categories.

In relation to the hindrances, impermanence is pretty wonderful, isn't it? Do you notice that when greed comes, it doesn't stay? When anger comes, it doesn't stay? When fear comes, it doesn't stay? When sadness comes, it doesn't stay? None of the emotions last, and that's really why we can feel them. That's why it's safe to open to any state of mind. There is ultimately no harm in any state of mind if we meet it with mindfulness, because none of them will stick around.

I want to read this passage from Rainer Maria Rilke from a poem in a really lovely book called The Book of Hours, recently translated by Joanna Macy and Anita Barrows, who are both Buddhists. And in this poem, Rilke was going through a very Christian phase. He'd been to Russia and visited a lot of churches that inspired him. A lot of these poems are written to God. In fact, it's subtitled Love Poems to God. So in this one, he imagines that God is making the human being and then giving advice before sending the human being out into life. So that's the setting for the poem.

"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'll know it by its seriousness. Now, give me your hand."

Let yourself feel everything, the beauty and the terror. No feeling is final. Impermanence is our safety net, an opening to any experience that comes.

But there's another side to it. This is a difficult truth to take in because we have a really deep longing for security. All forms of life have a very deep longing to be secure. All the phrases that we say in the metta practice apply to all living things. We want to be safe. We want to have mental happiness. We want to have physical happiness. We want to live with ease. This deep longing for security can't be found in the middle of impermanent things.

This insight cannot be found from impermanent things. Anything we grasp from that deep longing for security is bound to change, and as it changes, we suffer. This brings us to the second fundamental characteristic of existence that the Buddha called dukkha. While usually translated as suffering, dukkha encompasses a broader range of meaning—it includes suffering, but also unsatisfactoriness and unreliability. Because things are constantly changing, they simply cannot be relied upon. This is not that kind of world.

The nature of our world was beautifully described by the Buddha in a dialogue with Ananda, and to fully appreciate this teaching, it helps to understand the wordplay in the Pali language. When Ananda, the Buddha's cousin and attendant, asked what he meant by "the world," the Buddha replied with elegant simplicity. The Pali term for world is "loka," and the Buddha answered, "It disintegrates. Therefore, it's called the world." The word for disintegrate is "paloka." Why is it called loka? Because it palokas. This is why it's called the world.

The world disintegrates moment after moment. This is the very nature of reality. We yearn for something solid to grasp, but such solidity doesn't exist over long periods of time—it doesn't even exist from moment to moment. This is where your meditation practice can reveal truths that no amount of conceptual reflection can uncover. When you have the direct experience of every aspect of phenomena arising and passing away, you can no longer believe in that kind of solidity, a solidity that extends beyond a single moment.

The Buddha offered a vivid metaphor for our struggle in this disintegrating world. He said that trying to hold on in such a world is like someone being swept down a river with a swift current. As the person is carried along, they keep reaching out desperately for something on the bank to grasp, something to stop the flow downstream. But all they find are grasses. They grab one type of grass and it's simply pulled out of the bank, leaving them to be swept along. They reach for another kind and grab it, but it too is uprooted from the bank, and they continue downstream. This is the image of beings struggling within the river of change, seeking something concrete to stabilize them.

The Buddha described three different kinds of suffering that range from the more gross to the increasingly subtle. James and I, along with some friends, attended teachings about a year ago with the Dalai Lama in Mountain View. Some of you may have been at those sessions at Shoreline Amphitheater. It was like a dharma festival—absolutely magnificent. The Dalai Lama was on a large stage in this concert setting, and behind the stage, where you'd normally see racks of amplifiers and speakers, was painted an enormous mural of the Potala Palace in Lhasa, his former home, rendered in beautiful twilight light as though it were late afternoon.

Sharing the stage with him were about one hundred and fifty monks and nuns from all three traditions. Tibetans sat on one side—a whole sea of red robes—while on the other side were Theravadan, Korean, and other Zen monastics. The sight was simply delightful. It was sunny, with something like six thousand people in attendance. I thought to myself, "Well, I didn't get to go to Woodstock, but this might be even better." We basked in that dharma glow for three days.

The Dalai Lama explained a text on emptiness, and as he spoke about the world's nature of dissolving, he said—being a bodhisattva who encourages the bodhisattva path—"If you really want to help beings emerge from their suffering, you must understand all the ways in which they suffer, from the gross to the subtle."

He explained these three levels of suffering that the Buddha also taught. The first is called "the suffering of pain"—dukkha dukkha in Pali, like a double shot of suffering. This refers to unpleasant experiences in mind and body: when the body aches, when we're sick, when the mind experiences difficult states.

When we experience sadness and grief and longing and fear, this is straight dukkha.

The second kind is called viparinama dukkha, and it's translated as the suffering of alternation. This

means that if we are enjoying something pleasant—because if it's conditional, if it's a phenomenon of the six senses, and it changes, which it will in time—if we're holding on, we experience pain in its loss at that time of change. This is the pain of alternation. The pleasant will eventually turn into unpleasant, and when that happens, it hurts.

Ajahn Chah talked often about these two kinds of pain. He said it's like if you grab a snake—either end is problematic. If you grab its head, it can bite you, and that's dukkha dukkha. You're directly bitten and hurt. If you grab it by the tail, the other end, and you're holding on tight, the head will swing around and bite you. And that's the pain of clinging to the pleasant. Either way, eventually, one gets bitten if you're holding on.

The third is called sankhara dukkha, and this means the suffering—or you could really say the unsatisfactoriness—of conditioned formations. This is the sense in which we can't take hold of anything, we can't find security because of the dissolving nature of all our experience. Everything that is conditioned, everything that arises based on prior conditions—this means anything in the senses—has this disillusioning quality to it. And as we try to find our security in the middle of it, we can't. And yet as human beings we have a deep longing for security. All of us do. So this is our situation. This is our dilemma. We see there's no way to guarantee a lasting kind of happiness by holding on to what is going to change.

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 transience, we suffer. So the cause of suffering is our non-acceptance of this truth. The teaching of the cause of suffering and the teaching that everything changes are two sides of one coin. Without accepting the fact that everything changes, we cannot find perfect composure."

The corollary is that if we can accept the fact that everything changes, there's the possibility of finding perfect composure. This is a really interesting statement to me. Although the world is unstable, there is the possibility of finding composure within it. What's the key? Where does the avenue lie to that?

And to look at this, I want to talk a little bit about the third characteristic, which is the teaching of not-self, or in Pali the term is anatta. In many ways, this is the central question in meditation: Who am I? Or what am I?

Stephen and Martine Batchelor were just here. I don't know if any of you got a chance to listen to them. Martine spent ten years in a Korean Zen monastery where the meditation technique was to sit down, watch the breath in, watch the breath out, and ask the question, "What is this?" Watch the breath in, watch the breath out, ask the question, "What is this?" For ten years. This is the same question. Who am I? What am I? What is this? It's all the same question.

So as human beings, we have a sense of a self. And in our current situation, most of our life revolves

around it. Most of our activities and thoughts and plans and hopes and dreams and worries revolve around this self. It's where we put most of our energy. But what's curious is that we generally haven't taken a very close look at it.

And so I wonder if in your meditation you've ever tried to find this I. Where is this I located? Have you ever looked?

Where is this I? The Dalai Lama said that if you just think about it, it seems obvious that there is an I. Who would question it? It's the most self-evident fact of life. Obviously there's an I. But when you look closely, you can't find the thing. Is it in the head? Is it behind the eyes? Is it somewhere in the middle of the heart? William James, the Western philosopher, said when he looked for the location of the I, the closest he could get was a little tickle in the back of his throat. That's as close as anyone can get, probably. Our concept of I hasn't been examined, and if it's examined, it doesn't stand up very well.

Let me ask you two simple questions—they're not trick questions. How tall are you? And what color are your eyes? Is everybody able to answer those? Pretty simple, right?

I would say I am 5 feet 10 inches tall. Now when I stop to think about that, I really have to wonder, is that an accurate representation of I? Are my thoughts 5 feet 10 inches tall? Is my metta 5 feet 10 inches tall? Are my other emotions 5 feet 10 inches tall? We really mean the body, don't we? Here, when we say I, we mean the body. So we're saying I am the body.

Now I asked, what color are your eyes? I would say my eyes are brown. Well, this is curious. Now I'm not the body. I'm the person who owns the body. These are my eyes. Oh, really? Who? My. I own these eyes. They're mine. Well, that doesn't fit. A moment before we were the body and now we're the owner of the body who's standing separate from it.

You could do the same thing with the mind. You could say at one point, I am happy, and then we are the mind. We are the state of happiness. The next moment you talk about my sadness, my grief, my longing. And then we're the owner of the emotion who stands separate from it.

Maybe even more fundamental, after we get past those two, there's a sense that we are an observer and it's almost like we live behind our eyes and we look out at the world through those eyes, taking in all the experience, and it's all happening to me who am located somewhere inside here. This doesn't hang together. It really doesn't make sense.

The more you investigate the sense of I—which is encouraged, the delusion is encouraged through our language—the more you'll see it doesn't make sense.

I want to ask another question to explore this. Does the sense of I ever come up by itself? Take a look in your practice and see. Or does it only come up in relationship to something that's happening at one of the sense doors? For instance, we notice that there's a pain here in the knee, and we might think then, I have a

pain, or there's a pain in my knee. The I is forming in relationship to an experience of a bodily sensation. We might look out and see a baby deer. The deer doesn't really involve us, but very often we'll think to ourselves, I see the deer.

So we create an owner of the sight or an agent of the seeing in relationship to that sight. Maybe that's the only place the "I" comes from—connecting with an experience.

Take a look and see if you can feel this self emerging. And if you can, what's happening? What's the feeling in the body of that formation? See if there's a kind of sense energetically of a contraction around the emergence of that "I"—a kind of solidification and narrowing down around the sense of self.

This "I" limits us. We construct a kind of constant, ongoing entity that maybe doesn't really exist, not in that ongoing way. We have the feeling—obviously we have the feeling there's an "I"—but when we look for it, it gets more and more elusive.

There's a sutta of the Buddha's called the Bahiya Sutta, and he was asked to give his pith instructions to someone who came for teaching. And he said, "I'll tell you in a nutshell: In the seeing, let there be just the seen. In the hearing, let there be just the heard. In the sensing, let there be just the sensed. In the cognizing, let there be just the cognized. This—just this—is the end of suffering."

What's missing in this formulation is the seer, the hearer, the sensor, the cognizer. Experiment with this in your practice. Can there be a moment of experience where there is only the seeing, no one claiming it? Only the hearing, no one claiming it? And see if in a moment of that kind of pure perception, there isn't a quality of expansiveness, of peace—in fact, of freedom. The "I"-making experience narrows our experience, contracts us over and over and over again.

And it also builds up this quality, which is really the heart of the problem: self-cherishing. We become so fixated on my wants and needs and hopes and plans and fears and schemes and worries that we lose touch with the situation for the rest of the world. As we undo this contraction and open up to this spacious awareness that we really are, that we deeply are, as the knot of "I" starts to unravel just a little bit, we have the space to connect with the rest of the world's situation.

And we see everybody is in the same boat. Every human being is dealing with this problem of a longing for security where it's not to be found. And we can tune in on all those levels of insecurity that everyone faces. And when we see that clearly, there's really only one response, and that's compassion.

So this process of looking into the nature of the "I" is not just an intellectual exercise. It's not just a Buddhist mind game that philosophers play because they got tired of counting the number of angels on the head of a pin. It is to undo our self-centeredness and open in compassion to the rest of life. And I think this is really strongly supported with the practice of the Brahmaviharas—of metta and the other divine abidings.

As we open in this expansive way, we start to see that what we most deeply are is this awareness. This awareness that holds all the comings and goings, all the changing phenomena called the dhammas—things, phenomena, appearances—all the comings and goings of the momentary flashings into existence and passing out of existence are held within this vast spaciousness.

But curiously, this vastness of mind doesn't seem to come and go. Do you notice how it's always there—always illuminating, always functioning? This seems to be more of a constant in our experience. It seems to be the nature, really, of who we are.

As we shift our ground of being from grasping the particulars and let it expand into this vast awareness that holds all of life, out of which compassion flowers, we find the possibility of not clinging. We find the possibility of not generating that restriction of "I." And of course, we will continue many, many, many more times to grasp and form that "I." But we've seen the possibility. We've seen the doorway to freedom through letting go of what changes.

I just want to close with a quotation from Ajahn Mahabua, who's a master in the Thai Forest tradition, a dharma brother of Ajahn Chah, who put it this way: "There's no escaping this truth. Whatever arises has to vanish. Whatever is true, whatever is a natural principle in and of itself, won't vanish. In other words, the pure mind of awareness won't vanish. This vanishes, that vanishes, but that which knows they're vanishing doesn't vanish. This is what's called the pure mind. All that remains is simple awareness, utterly pure."

So let's just sit for a minute together. This vanishes, that vanishes, but that which knows they're vanishing doesn't vanish. This is what's called the pure mind.

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