Impermanence

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 59:01

Sally talked last night about wise attention and how we can use it in our practice to clear up the misperceptions of things that we often fall into perceiving. I think it's interesting how that issue also relates to the question that was asked in the hall this morning: why is it important to pay attention to the details of the breath if what we really want to do is clear up things in our daily life to live with more wisdom and compassion? I want to talk about both of those aspects tonight.

In the broad scope of things, as Sally said, we pay attention to the breath in order to learn to pay attention. We find that this paying attention steadies the mind and reduces the amount of wayward thinking that comes in. As the mind gets steady, it's able to see more clearly the way things really are, to perceive things the way that they truly are. This is the realm of insight, and it's the area that the Buddha said led to the greatest freedom.

There's a direct connection between seeing the way the breath is and seeing the way the whole world is. You could say that if you train yourself to see the nature of one breath very clearly, then you see the nature of the whole world. There's really no difference between this piece of nature and that whole piece of nature out there.

So then the question comes in: what is it that's important to see about the breath or about the world? What should we be looking at? Or another way to say it is: what is the nature of the breath and what is the nature of the world?

When the Buddha answered this question, he pointed to what he called the three characteristics of everything that exists. He said these are the things that would be helpful to see, and they are: first, that all conditioned things are impermanent.

In letting that statement in, we need to stop and ask: what is a conditioned thing that the Buddha is saying is impermanent? A conditioned thing is anything that arises based on prior conditions. For instance, our bodies are here because at some point our parents joined and a sperm met an egg and the body was nourished in the womb and came out and received food and air and water. So this body is here because of prior conditions.

This building is here because of prior conditions. The trees grew in a forest. The cement came out of the earth. The light fixtures were manufactured by somebody else. Is there anything you can look at in the world that wasn't previously something else? Probably not. This whole thing we call earth came out of dust that collected around the star that we call the sun.

So all conditioned things means everything that we can see with our eyes and touch with our hands, smell and taste. It also refers to the inner life, because when you look at the thoughts you have, they all came out of past causes and conditions, and the emotions we have all come because we're alive and human and contacting the world. All conditioned things means everything that we know. Everything we know is impermanent.

He also said all conditioned things are unsatisfactory. Why is that? All conditioned things are unsatisfactory—you might say ultimately unsatisfying—because if something came out of a prior condition and cause, it itself is going to be a subsequent condition for a later arising. And in that, it's going to decay. Everything that came into being is also going to be of the nature to pass away. In its passing away, it means there's no lasting happiness from it. So all conditioned things are ultimately not going to satisfy us, and that means everything that we see with our eyes and that touches our mind.

The third one was a little different. He said all things are not self. He didn't say all conditioned things. He said all things. So what's the difference between conditioned things and all things? In the teachings of the Buddha, there is one element, one Dhamma, he would say, that is a thing that's not a conditioned thing, and that is the unconditioned thing. The unconditioned thing the Buddha called nibbana. That is not impermanent, it's not unsatisfactory, but it is not self. We'll talk more about that later.

Tonight I want to focus on the first of these three characteristics, the nature of impermanence. All conditioned things are impermanent, unsatisfactory, and all things are not self.

Sometimes this is considered a key teaching of Buddhism, but really, if you put the label Buddhism on it, it makes it sound like a sect or a religious cult or something like that. But really, what the Buddha said is that these three things are true whether or not a Buddha says they are. Whether or not a Buddha arises in this world to say these three things, it's still the way things are. That's why Buddhism is really not—I don't consider it a religion so much as a teaching about the nature of things, just the way things are, free of sectarian observations or bias.

One of the difficulties about the three characteristics is that we have a built-in bias already against seeing them. That's why they're so hard to understand and why the teaching of the Buddha is in effect revolutionary, because the perception of these three qualities goes against the mainstream culture of any time and age, not just our current one, but any time and age. And it's because we as human beings want to find a lasting happiness.

We want the world to offer us the stability of lasting peace and satisfaction. I think we're born out of that longing. I don't think we would be here in this current incarnation if we didn't have that desire very strongly. So I believe from the time we come out of the womb, we're looking for the world to provide us with lasting happiness.

And the problem is that it can't.

That's why spiritual training is helpful. When we want the world to be one way and it's another way, we're going to suffer. So the training is: can we see the world the way it is, and then can we live in harmony with the way it is?

This seeing of the way things are is freeing in itself. To see impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self is deeply freeing for the heart. But it's not the end of the road for freedom, because these particular insights change the mind in such a way that it opens to go beyond conditioned things altogether and to touch that deepest truth of the unconditioned, of nibbana. It's said that the direct touch or direct realization of the unconditioned does the complete work of freeing the mind.

I want to talk particularly about impermanence tonight—about how it frees our mind in a relative sense, and then how it opens the mind to the deeper truth of what is beyond change, what's beyond impermanence.

In looking at change or impermanence, I want to discuss it on three time scales, because the teaching is true for all scales of time. We'll look at it in terms of the cosmic timeframe, in the timeframe of one human life, and then as a ground of meditative insight—how it's true on a moment-to-moment basis and how we can see that.

On the cosmic scale, from a naive point of view, we tend to think of the earth and sky and sun and moon and stars as eternal. Certainly for all the generations of humans, they have appeared that way. In native cultures, they're spoken of in that way. There's a Native American poem that says, "The old men say, the earth alone endures. You spoke truly. You were right."

This is a deep view in the history of humanity. It's only really in the last hundred years that Western science has come to say, "Maybe that's not the way things are." With the theory of the Big Bang, maybe there was a moment when no matter existed at all, some twelve billion years ago. Then all matter came out of that nothing of the Big Bang.

The Earth is about four billion years old, and at some time in the future will not exist anymore. It's said that the sun will burn out, and in its burning up, the heat from it will turn this place to a crisp. So you don't want to be around for that. Finish your work before then. That's a few billion years, but it would be a good time to be in another realm.

Even space may be temporary. There's actually been a debate within the Buddhist tradition: Is space conditioned or unconditioned? That's something scholars have debated for years. But from the Western scientific point of view, even space arose out of the Big Bang and will collapse again if contraction happens into another Big Bang. So we'll see. I'm curious about that myself, but that's what they say.

On a cosmic scale, we can see change on a very vast scale in very vast times. Nothing physical is permanent.

But more interesting to us is the measure of one human life. Within one human life, how do we see impermanence, and how do we refuse to see impermanence? How do we turn away from that understanding?

The message of our culture, the Western paradise as we know it, seems to be that lasting happiness is possible through acquiring. We've seen this again and again: more money, bigger house, newer car, fancier clothes, better body. The options for better bodies are getting incredible now through surgical procedures. You can almost order the body you want. And when they get into tampering with DNA, you might be able to do that in the cells of the embryo. I hope not. But that might be possible—order the body that your parents want for you.

We've all seen that this is a limited kind of satisfaction. It is a kind of satisfaction—let's be real about that. The satisfaction of material things is real, but it's transitory and not so deep.

But it is real. Seeing the limitation of this material satisfaction, we come into spiritual life wanting to discover if there's a possibility of lasting happiness through this territory, through this domain. And we start to understand the source of real happiness—that genuine happiness in life comes from a heart that has been purified. When the heart is pure, happiness is simply a natural result.

In the Buddha's teachings, the pure heart means the heart that has been freed, at least to some extent if not totally, from the forces of wanting, of disliking, and of confusion. Regardless of our material possessions or lack thereof, when the heart is free of these forces, there is deep peace and contentment. We don't need to look outside the heart for that.

But what's interesting is that as we train in this direction of peace and contentment and freedom from wanting and disliking, there are many ups and downs along the way. We come to understand the beauty of freedom, the beauty of peace, the beauty of concentration as we encounter those states through our Dharma practice. Then the acquiring mind, which is a deeply conditioned tendency, tends to get focused on those spiritual acquisitions rather than material ones. But the same kind of gaining mind can come into play.

So we become really pleased when peace appears, when concentration appears, when ease and relaxation come into our sitting, when we're able to be in the present moment for a stretch of time and the body relaxes and we let go of the burden of worries or hoping. Then as we continue to watch, that state of peace falls away, as it will with time. And there can be a strong reaction to that loss, even greater than if our savings account had dropped or somebody had put a dent in our new car. It can be much more alarming.

So even in retreat, we go through the same kind of cycle of wanting, of holding, and suffering when they disappear as we do with events in daily life.

There was a fascinating article a little over a year ago in the New York Times that reported on research being done at Harvard and other universities by psychologists. The title of the article—you'll appreciate

this—was "The Futile Pursuit of Happiness." The researchers looked at what happened when we got the things we want in life and what happened when we got the things we didn't want in life, tracking people's experience over time.

The basic conclusion is that we are not very good at predicting whether things are going to make us happy or for how long they're going to make us happy. They examined many different cases—things like a new car, a new job, the right relationship, winning the lottery, becoming wealthy—all those things we want in the outer world, and tracked people's happiness quotient over time.

They found, as we might expect, that getting a new BMW brought a temporary spike in happiness, but not as much as people had expected. And that happiness tended to decay, disappearing more quickly than people had anticipated. So the basic lesson is that the good things that happened in the outer realm didn't make people as happy as they thought they would, or for as long as they thought they would.

They also looked at the difficulties—loss of job, loss of relationship, loss of loved ones through death. And they found the same kind of effect: these losses and disappointments made people unhappy, but not to the degree they'd thought, not as unhappy as they'd expected. People proved resilient, coming back from these losses faster than they'd anticipated.

In other words, we don't know as humans how to predict impermanence in our lives, how to account for it, or what its effect on us is going to be. What was interesting is that the main researcher, Daniel Gilbert from Harvard, was ambivalent about his own conclusions. They basically point out that we make too much drama about everything. As Sally was saying last night, we think we're going to get really high about the ups and really crash with the lows. And it doesn't happen as much as we think.

This researcher said: "Hope and fear are enduring features of the human experience, and it is unlikely that people are going to abandon them anytime soon just because some psychologist tells them they should." The Buddha actually told people to abandon hope and fear and that it was a pretty good thing, but the psychologist was mixed in his message. He continued: "I don't think I want to give up all these motivations. I don't think I want to learn too much from my research in that sense."

This is the bias of the ego—it doesn't want to see the effect of change, wants to hold onto the prospect of lasting happiness. And with that comes the converse: the fear of lasting unhappiness. Because of course, where this study points is toward putting our trust in equanimity—that we're going to be okay through all the ups and downs, that they're not going to affect us as much as we think, that we're going to smoothly sail through those difficulties in some way.

I think it's really interesting to look at this in retreat life as well. We go through the same ups and downs—the development of peace and finding that relative freedom, the ease of concentration and relaxation. And then what happens when we lose it? We often go through a strong reaction to that loss.

Often when concentration goes, it's accompanied by a surge of hindrances—a storm of emotions,

agitation, lots of thought energy, lots of agitation in the body. This itself is somewhat unpleasant. But what's even worse are the conclusions we draw from it. I don't know if you've had enough days yet to start going through this cycle, but usually when we hit that downslope, we get really worried: "I've lost it."

I was just getting settled into the meditation. I was just learning how to do it. I had that sitting that was really still and now it's gone. Where is it? What did I do wrong? Am I not a good meditator anymore? How am I going to get it back? Is it ever going to come back? I'm never going to get it back. The rest of the retreat is going to be full of hindrances and agitation. I've really blown it. I may as well leave now. It's never going to come together again.

So in this moment of difficulty, what we can tend really easily to do is take a moment of experience that we find unpleasant—in this case—and project it forever into the future. The whole two months is going to be like this, or the whole month is going to be like this.

I remember when I was a kid, I had measles when I was five years old. I was laid up in bed for a few days, and my mother would bring me the only food I wanted to eat, which was boiled hot dogs with a dab of ketchup. It was my diet to get through the measles for some reason. But I remember she'd also bring a mirror so I could see how my recovery was going. Basically what I remember is that it wasn't going. I'd look at my face in the mirror every day and I'd see the same number of red spots on my face. I was totally convinced they were never going to go away. I knew that those red spots were going to be with me the rest of my life, however long that was.

I still bring the same attitude into my meditation. I saw it recently when I went to Burma. I mentioned the other night that I got to go this past summer and ordained for six weeks. I ordained with a very wonderful monk, a Burmese teacher named Paok Sayadaw. I hope he might be able to come during our retreat and talk to us. I've invited him because he's going to be in Northern California in late February, and I hope he'll be able to come here. He's seventy years old. He's been in robes since he was ten. He's a really kind-hearted man with a lot of loving-kindness and very deep practice, as you can imagine for somebody who spent the last sixty years sitting mostly in remote places.

So I went because I wanted to learn a special style of practice that he teaches on the breath. He teaches a very focused and potentially deep style of concentration practice. I wasn't able to get anywhere near the depth that he was capable of teaching, but nonetheless, I found it very helpful for my concentration and my practice.

But I made one mistake in going to Burma. I arrived at the height of the monsoon. I knew I was going into a rains retreat. Sylvia talked about how February is often our rains retreat. I knew it was a rains retreat, but I've been through a number of rains in Asia, and normally they don't bother me. Sunny in the morning, two inches of rain in the afternoon, and it clears up again. That I don't mind.

But when I got to the monastery, it rained for about the next three weeks solid. So I watched the white

mold grow on my belt and my leather suitcase handles, and I smelled the smell of that mildew arising in my hut every day a little stronger. I noticed how it took three days for my robes to dry when I needed to wash them out. And I'm a kind of California guy at this point and I love the sunshine. So I found the atmosphere very gloomy. It was just really difficult for me to adjust to the rain. I got very low.

And at the same time, I was adjusting to being in the robes. I came to the monastery on Tuesday afternoon after a ten-hour bus ride that covered two hundred miles. If you can imagine that, it was brutal. Came to the monastery about six p.m. and was ordained by one p.m. the next day. And adjusting to the climate, the diet, the robes, the teacher and the new practice and the new place all at once while it was raining nonstop.

So I got kind of low in those first few weeks. It was a little more than I had bargained for. And I was convinced that it was going to be like that for the whole six weeks I was there. I was convinced it was going to keep raining.

I was never going to see the sun again. I was going to stay in this depressive mood the whole time, and nothing was going to change. I really believed it without examining it. Six weeks is a long time. If you're here for a month, that can feel like a long time. And two months can feel like forever. Once you get into retreat, it's hard to see beyond the end of two months. So six weeks felt like almost forever. I couldn't see beyond the end of it.

At one point when I was feeling really low, I had a photograph with me of the Dalai Lama—a photo I keep on my altar that Sally gave me, with a very compassionate look on his face. So I turned to the Dalai Lama and said, "Your Holiness, do you have any advice for me? I could really use some good advice."

Immediately came his reply in his accented English, his sort of Indian English. He said, "Yes. Stay optimistic and cheerful and confident. A positive attitude is the best support." And that was all he had to say. A positive attitude is the best support.

So I really tried to work with those teachings. It's possible to put yourself in that optimistic and confident frame of mind at times. Then there were other times when it was not possible to put myself in that optimistic and cheerful frame of mind, and I just had to go through it.

That was almost the most interesting part—going through the difficult time when I didn't feel optimistic or cheerful or confident. Because I had to find out that I could bear those feelings too. That I could bear feeling low and not even imagining a light at the end of that tunnel. And I could keep doing my practice and keep showing up for my meals and interviews and keep putting one foot in front of another in my walking and just bear it.

What grows as I did that—what grew for me and I know what grows for you—is faith. The quality that James talked about the other night as the first of the five spiritual faculties is this quality of faith or trust or confidence that we can weather those storms too. However dark it looks, we can bear it. And then the

miracle of impermanence is that it always turns around. If you keep looking, if you keep practicing, if you keep noticing the breath, noticing your step, opening to what is in each moment, those storms always pass in meditation.

So I found that. I found that equanimity could grow, that I could be in that low place and bear it, and also that it would turn around. And then the next time, the sun came out for a while, my spirits lifted, the practice got much easier. You notice that? The practice gets easier when the sun is out. We've been so lucky at the start of this retreat. I keep telling myself, "It's not going to last. It's not going to last. It's not going to last," but I really enjoy it while it's here.

And then the rains would come again, and I'd feel low again. But this time I had more equanimity. I knew that I could come through and come out the other side.

So we learn this trust in impermanence—that our current state, whatever it is, however you want to describe it, isn't going to be with us forever. In fact, that's really why it's safe to open to the emotions. When Howie talked about the hindrances we encounter on retreat and the next morning encouraged us to really feel into them, that is a safe practice.

It doesn't feel that way at first. Sometimes on retreat the strongest and most intense parts of our psyche come forward and we find ourselves in some intense state of fear or sadness or anger or longing. We don't feel we can trust it at first. We don't feel we necessarily have the courage to go into it. But as we start to trust and start to open, we find that it's okay because when we do, they all will also pass.

At first, we fight with them. It's like, "How can I get rid of this thing the quickest possible?" Because we really don't want to feel them. But we see something really interesting, and this is kind of a judo move—that when we resist something,

that emotion, we strengthen it. The force of our resistance goes directly into the strength of the emotion and actually sustains it. As long as it comes and we're resisting, pushing against, not wanting, hoping it will go away, bargaining with it, strategizing how to get rid of it, we're actually clinging to it. We've taken hold of it to make it go away, and that will sustain it.

So the judo move is we open with acceptance, and we find then you don't have to do anything to make it go. Its nature is to go. Its nature is to come and its nature is also to go. All you have to do is feel it and then watch it come, watch it go.

The same thing, of course, is true for all the beautiful states that come. The first time I experienced a lot of happiness on retreat, I thought, "Wow, it's going to be so much fun to live my life from this place." I thought of all the people I wanted to talk to and all the things I wanted to do when I was so joyful. And of course, it took about one day before that also evaporated. The energy of that flowered and then passed away.

This is from Rilke. It's a book I really love of his poems called *The Book of Hours*, subtitled in this translation "Love Poems to God." What's beautiful about this translation is it's done by two Buddhists—Anita Barrows and Joanna Macy—so it feels like it's in the family.

This poem is set imagining that as we are created, each of us is given a little pep talk by God before being launched into life. So this is the conversation God has with us before we're sent into existence:

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. Now give me your hand.

"Let everything happen to you, beauty and terror. No feeling is final. Just keep going." This is the safety of seeing impermanence—how all these things are just visitors to us.

One of the other ways we frequently experience impermanence in a human lifespan is through the phenomenon of aging. It really started to hit me in my early twenties when I looked back at the changes in my body and mind over my late teenage years. I realized this was going on in me, completely out of my control—the body was just doing its thing, whatever process it was. I was acutely aware of my parents, who were then about my current age, being in the same process, but for them it meant their death was closer. So it was very poignant to me.

But sometimes the aging process is beautiful. Howie was saying it's really hard for him now to go away and teach because he has a seventeen-month-old daughter. What's so wrenching, he said, is being away from her. She just happens to be, as her parents will confess, the smartest and most beautiful child in the world—there's a special catch in this case. But what's hard about leaving is that she changes so fast. That miracle of growth and aging and growing up is happening in her so clearly, and he doesn't want to miss a single day of the change.

But then, as we get older, the news of aging is not quite as cheery on first glance. Although actually, there is a lot of beauty in getting older, as I know many of you know. I have a friend who's in her mid to late seventies who tells me she's never been as happy as she is now. This is basically my experience also in my mid-fifties—I get happier every decade. I didn't expect that when I was younger, but I think it's really true for many of us in aging. It's a great gift.

But physically, it's a different story. Perhaps we once looked beautiful or handsome, and that's simply not happening anymore. I had a friend who was losing his hair—he's quite bald now. He said it was really difficult when he washed his face because when he got to his forehead, he didn't know where to stop.

When I was about thirty-five, I started getting gray hair. It came on quite quickly, actually. At one point, Sally and I were at a dharma talk in England. We'd been chatting, I got up and walked away, and

somebody said to her, "Who was that man?" She said, "What man are you talking about?" He said, "That man sitting next to you, that middle-aged man." I was thirty-five. She had the kindness to tell me this story—which I've used many times since—so that I could work with my self-image. I thought, well, thirty-five could be halfway to seventy. I could be gone by seventy. I guess that's middle age. Dealing with aging early on.

One thing many of us complain about as we get older is losing our memory. I see this happening too. Things aren't as easy to bring to mind—words, telephone numbers, people's names, directions. They don't come as quickly as they used to. Most of us bewail this and complain to each other about it. But I have one friend who's actually a dharma teacher who just laughs about it. He said, "Yeah, I can't remember anything anymore, but you know what? It makes life so much simpler." I really appreciate that spirit.

Then practice brings its own changes. We come into practice with one idea of ourselves, one image of our personality or who we are. As we open, that changes. I spoke a little about this the first night, and Sylvia touched on it in her talk on the Four Noble Truths—how as we open to the suffering we encounter, there's an unlayering process that happens. We contact these old habit patterns of personality, patterns of mind and heart, and as we touch them and bring them into awareness, we have the possibility to release them.

When that happens, experientially it feels like there's much more space in the mind, and the body relaxes to a deeper level. In many ways, I think it's fair to say that the whole of our dharma practice is about unlayering this old holding—the accumulation of many years of hurt, emotion, patterns, holding in the muscles, different emotions and tensions, memories. Some would say it goes back not just one lifetime but many lifetimes, the karmic accumulations of perhaps lifetimes of living.

As these things come up to be experienced, they are not easy. When we talk about the hindrances that arise in practice, it's helpful to remember this is an integral part of what we're doing here. It's not accidental. It doesn't mean we've gone off track, that we're doing anything wrong, that we're sloppy meditators, that there's something wrong with us for having hindrances. This is the inevitable uncovering and shedding of old habits and old accumulations. It's really clearing the way for new life, new perspective, for the heart of metta and compassion and clarity and wisdom to be born. This is a beautiful part of the process.

But in the middle of it, it can seem relentless. One teacher described spiritual practice as a relentless process of letting go—letting go, letting go. We're called to do this over and over again at deeper and deeper levels of ourselves. When we see that we're letting go of the past, we're letting go of who we used to be, letting go of memories, definitions, self-image. In a way, then we understand what Krishnamurti meant when he said that living rightly is dying. Living is dying.

As we let go of the accumulation of the past, that stuff can be truly gone. But its gone-ness, its total gone-ness, can open the way for a really new and fresh experience of life.

Of course, death isn't just happening in spiritual terms around us. There's an interesting passage from the Mahabharata, an Indian epic, where a wise person is asked, "What's the most miraculous thing on this earth?"

And the wise person replies, "The most miraculous thing is that all of us humans see death happening all around us and don't believe it will happen to us."

This is another aspect of the ego's bias—not wanting to see that death has personal implications. It's a powerful reminder of impermanence, maybe the most powerful. Freud believed that our whole human neurosis was built out of our refusal to acknowledge our own death, to really get deeply the fact that we will die at some point.

So calling this truth to mind is classically, in the Buddhist tradition, a very powerful motivation for spiritual practice. It was one of the Buddha's heavenly messengers, as James mentioned the other night. The Buddha saw a corpse and was awakened to that reality. As he reflected on it later, he said this: "An uninstructed person seeing a corpse feels repelled and disgusted, but I reflected that I too will die and come to be a corpse someday. So it is not befitting for me to be repelled and disgusted by a corpse. Seeing this, the pride I took in life entirely vanished." He said the same thing in relation to aging and to illness—that he lost the pride of youth and he lost the pride of health.

There's a little bit of the teaching that Sally was pointing to in describing the exhibited body worlds—some of the message that can come from seeing corpses standing next to a human body that used to be alive.

Carlos Castaneda was once asked in a kind of social dinner club setting, "How can I bring more spirituality into my life? I'm looking for something kind of uplifting and pleasant." And he said, "As you go through your day, reflect that every person you meet that day will be dead in 100 years or less. That will turn you onto a spiritual track very quickly."

We usually feel death as a threat. In some ways it's the ultimate threat to the ego—the end of ego, the end of what we take ourselves to be. But actually the Buddha said that we don't have to fear death. It's not necessary to fear death. He said a person fears death under certain conditions: if we're greatly attached to sense pleasures, greatly attached to this body, if we've done harmful things in our life and we've neglected to do helpful things in the area of morality and generosity, and if one does not have faith in the Dhamma, in the teachings or in the truth.

He said, but on the other hand, one who fulfills these four conditions doesn't fear death: one who is not greatly attached to sense pleasures, not greatly attached to the body, who has not done great harm, has done good things, and has faith in the Dhamma. Well, it's still a high bar. It's not going to be easy to reach, but it's possible. That might be humanly possible—not to fear death. That would be amazing.

So the Buddha recommended, because we have this built-in block to seeing the truth of death, to reflect on it daily. He recommended five daily reflections along these lines. I'll just read them and let you take them

in:

I am of the nature to grow old. I have not gone beyond aging.
I am of the nature to become sick. I have not gone beyond illness.
I am of the nature to die. I have not gone beyond death.
At death, I will be separated from all that is dear and beloved to me.
I am the owner of my actions—my karma. All that I do, for good or for ill, of that I will be the heir.

So these are a number of ways that in our daily life, as we move through the month or two months of the retreat, we can touch on the truth of impermanence: that states come and go, that we have the equanimity to weather them, that nothing in the emotional realm will last, to reflect on our own passing, to reflect on the process of aging.

The Buddha said, "When the perception of impermanence is developed and cultivated, it eliminates all ignorance and it eliminates the conceit 'I am'—the false belief in self." So this is powerful medicine: eliminating ignorance, eliminating the conceit "I am."

But there's another layer, another level to see impermanence at that's not just part of daily reflection or daily life, that really requires the development of meditative insight that, as far as I know, is not accessible any other way. My feeling is that as we reflect on the aspects of impermanence as it plays out over a human life, it will penetrate to a certain depth in our understanding of life, our relation to life. But I'm not sure that it always gets deeply into the marrow.

As the Buddha enunciated the fullness of developing the perception of impermanence, he also added some other pieces to what that perception involves. And that's what I want to talk about now.

As the attention collects through mindfulness—just through paying attention to what is in the present moment—and the mind gets steady in the quality of concentration, we start to have the mental power to see the world, to see our experience of the world in a new way, a way that we probably haven't seen before.

The fact is that impermanence is taking place in a much more rapid way than we normally think of it as. You probably know the teaching of quantum mechanics, where the scientists understood that matter is not solid, but composed of protons, neutrons, and electrons, which are all in the constant process of flux, actually appearing and disappearing and reappearing.

That an electron is not a solid particle whose position can be found, but rather its relationship to the atom is more like a smear of charge or a probability graph of where it might be. You can't get a hold of an electron. So the scientists found this out, but they didn't integrate it into their understanding. Most scientists still run around thinking the world is just as solid as before.

Through Dharma practice, we can really touch the truth of that lack of solidity.

A few of us went down a couple of years ago to hear teachings from the Dalai Lama. He was teaching at Shoreline Amphitheater in Mountain View, south of San Francisco. It was a really beautiful setting. He was up on a high throne on the stage, and he talked about that throne. He said, "It's not about being a big person. It's about delivering high teachings," which was sweet. It wasn't personal, this throne business.

Behind him, where the speaker set would have been for the Grateful Dead—those floor-to-ceiling racks of speakers—was instead a canvas with a painting of the Potala, the palace in Lhasa where the Dalai Lama used to live, where he grew up, which was considered his personal residence, a thousand-room palace. It was painted at twilight, as sunset colors were reflecting on the windows, with a kind of mauve tone to it. It was beautiful.

On the left of the stage were maybe eighty Tibetan monks, all in their bright red robes. On the right side of the stage were Tibetan nuns, Theravadan monks in their brown robes, Theravadan nuns, Vietnamese Zen monks and nuns. The whole stage was full of Buddhist monastics.

He was teaching on emptiness and the Heart Sutra, which I find really inspiring. In this teaching on emptiness, he said that if you really want to understand how people are caught—because you want to help them come out of suffering—you need to understand all the ways that they're caught. He said one of the ways is in not seeing impermanence clearly.

He said, "Don't imagine that it's just that something goes along that people are holding on to, that we're holding on to something. It goes along and it's really stable and then all of a sudden it changes and goes away. It's not like that." He said, "Things are dissolving all along the way. Constant state of flux. They were never solid in the first place."

Our meditation can bring us into that level of seeing.

I can just invite you right now: take a look at the sensations in your body, wherever you feel sensations in your body. Maybe the touch point, the contact of the sitting bones with the cushion. Is there something solid there? Or can you feel that changing? Can you feel the fluctuations of the pulsation, the vibration of the current of energy arising at your sitting bones?

As your hands are coming into contact with your body or with each other, is that a solid sensation or is it changing a little bit in each moment? Can you feel the pulse and the vibration, the kind of on-off quality of that?

As we tune into these subtle sensations of the body, we discover there's nothing solid in it. And similarly, we can investigate all the other domains of the senses. Sounds which come and go, smells which are so ethereal, tastes which are so transitory. Sight is the hardest—that takes a little more reflection. We'll talk about that another time. Emotions, none of them lasting. Thoughts, just momentary.

By paying close attention, we refine our seeing that this transitory nature of every aspect of experience is

inescapable. We just turn the attention there and we see the change. This requires a certain degree of presence and a certain base of concentration before it becomes so obvious.

This is the beauty of paying that detailed attention because we start to see that there is nothing solid in the whole of physical nature. There is nothing solid in the whole of mental phenomena. That we get in our marrow because we've seen it directly for ourselves. There's no point in holding when we see the dissolving happening in each moment that we turn and look.

In fact, in a way, we come to find out there was never an object there in the first place. There are no objects. There is only this transitory process of momentary phenomena arising and passing at the five physical senses and at the sense door of the mind.

Our concepts make them stable. We give concepts like woman and man and chair and floor and wall and sky and tree and earth. But when we look at each of those concepts, we see the concept is stable, and that misleads us into thinking the world is stable, but it's not. When we look underneath the concept to our actual experience, we find nothing is stable.

Everything is in the moment-to-moment process of change, of coming into existence and passing out, coming into existence and passing out.

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, saying, '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. Nothing is fixed. We're so much lighter than we think we are."

As we open up this meditative eye, the Dhamma vision, we start to see that the world isn't the way we took it to be. It's always just coming, going, coming, going, coming and going. It's more like a verb than a noun. And when you see it as a verb, you know you can't hold on. You can't hold on to action. It's changing too quickly.

Then the process of meditation becomes that of just settling back and knowing this changing flow of phenomena, knowing the changing stream with less and less inclination to grasp, because we see there is nothing that can be held onto. And as we rest more and more, this equanimity develops of it being okay that it's like this, of a sense of resting as the stream is going, a sense of deep peace, of coming into harmony with the way things truly are, not denying change, but also not being confused or entangled in it through clinging.

It's from this deep kind of peace that there's the possibility then of opening to what is not affected by change, to opening to what's beyond change—the unconditioned, nibbana, that which has been here from the beginning, is present now, will ever be here in the future.

This is also from Rumi: "Be with those who mix with God as honey blends with milk and say, 'Anything that comes and goes, rises and sets, is not what I love most. Live in the one who created the prophets.'" This is Buddha nature. Live in the one who created the Buddha, if you like. "Otherwise, you'll be like a fire left from a caravan, burning out alone beside the road."

So the Tibetans say about practice, our Dharma practice: In the beginning, nothing comes. All the teaching seems so remote and theoretical, and these beautiful states of wisdom and clarity and peace and metta seem so remote, so difficult. In the beginning, nothing comes.

In the middle, nothing stays. There's just the shifting nature of phenomena arising and passing, arising and passing very, very rapidly at times. But this is also just a stage.

Because in the end, nothing goes. Nothing goes. Everything has its existence within this background of peace, the unchanging nature of the unconditioned, the great space of equanimity and awareness in which, as one Zen scripture says, nothing is lacking and nothing is in excess.

Let's just sit for a minute. In the beginning nothing comes, in the middle nothing stays, and in the end nothing goes.

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