The Greatest Disappointment… Or Aniccā and Letting Go

Rebecca Bradshaw · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2012) · 1:00:50

There are two possible titles for tonight's talk. The first one is "The Greatest Disappointment Leading to Peace." And the second one is "Anicca and Letting Go."

I read a book with little stories about Suzuki Roshi recently—just little one-page stories with great little teachings. In one story, a student says to Suzuki Roshi that he's been listening to him for years, and he's confused. He just doesn't get it. Would Suzuki Roshi give him a one-sentence explanation of what Buddhism is about? Suzuki Roshi replied, "Here are the succinct secret teachings for you all: Everything changes." That was all he said. Everything changes.

All of our practice—the wisdom part of our practice—is about making peace with this truth. Everything changes, or anicca, impermanence. Anicca has far-reaching implications for how we understand happiness, how we live our lives. If it's carried through to its end, it really means that living in harmony with this world means understanding that there's only peace in letting go. The Buddha taught this as the heartwood of the practice: this truth that letting go is what brings the deepest peace or freedom. This is the freedom of an unfettered or uncontracted heart-mind. Ultimately, we're talking about letting go of clinging—clinging to any experience. This is what anicca teaches us.

It's said that there are three doorways to freedom in our practice: anicca, dukkha, and anatta. We've touched on all of these, surely. I know that Annie gave a talk on dukkha, and we've talked a lot about anatta, or not-self. Tonight, I'm going to round it out with talking about anicca, or impermanence.

Anicca is really the most elemental of these three truths or doorways to freedom because the other two are natural corollaries of this one. The fact that change is ceaseless, that we live in a world of constant change, means that things are not going to be permanently satisfying—that they're unsatisfactory or suffering, dukkha. And this truth of change also means that what we take to be ourselves is this process of constant change, and that we can't find a solid, independent, core self because of this.

Any one of the three leads to the other two. They're intricately intertwined—anicca, dukkha, and anatta. Often we'll have one that we connect with more than the others. It's kind of our doorway to freedom. Or sometimes you'll find that at certain times in practice, one will really be noticeable and up for you, and then that might shift in other years of practice. It's said that at the moment of enlightenment, one of these three truths crystallizes in the mind—that our understanding of it is so profound that it pierces the veil of delusion, of not seeing how things are. Understanding these characteristics—anicca, dukkha, anatta—is

the insight that leads to freedom, to the liberation of the heart and mind.

The other day we had a question that I answered, and there was a part of it that I didn't get into that I want to mention tonight. I think there was a question implicit about the difference between psychological insight and meditative insight. What exactly do we mean by insight in this practice?

Psychological insight is, you could say, a byproduct of practice. We sit here and we get certain understandings about how we as unique individuals work—our patterns of conditioning, the ways and stories and beliefs we get stuck in, ways we relate to others. This happens in practice, and it can be good and supportive of our practice if it leads to the unbinding of the heart and mind. Perhaps it leads to us making a commitment to live with better ethics, with more integrity, or to living with more compassion—if it clears the heart and mind of contraction.

However, it's not so helpful if the psychological insights just serve to strengthen our sense of ourselves—like, "Oh, so this is how I am." If we become overly fascinated with this kind of insight, we can actually take away from the greater benefit of what we call meditative insights: insights into anicca, dukkha, and anatta.

Meditative insights are much less personal. They're not about my personal story or who I am. The content doesn't matter much. Basically, they're the truth that all that arises passes away, the truth that because of that, things of this world—experiences of heart, mind, body—are not going to be ultimately satisfying, and they can't be claimed as me or mine. Meditative insight is all variations on those three themes.

So let's look at anicca.

Well, we will be looking at dukkha too. Can't avoid it.

The first time I heard the teachings of anicca, or impermanence, was in my eighth grade science class. I still remember where I was standing. I was hit so profoundly with this teaching. The teacher said, "The only thing constant is change. Change is the only thing that doesn't change." And I remember thinking, *wo w*—and thinking, *that's true*.

Years later, I can still remember what he said. What I didn't know at the time was that 2,500 years earlier, the Buddha had taught the same information as a key point for us to understand if we wish to travel this path of liberation. Maybe my teacher was a Buddhist, or maybe he was just a scientist. Some similar things are being understood in both paths.

The Buddha himself, in a well-known phrase, described anicca poetically by saying: "Thus shall you think of this fleeting world: a star at dawn, a bubble in a stream, a flash of lightning in a summer cloud, a flickering lamp, a phantom, and a dream." All of those images have the sense of here and gone. *Thus shall you think of this fleeting world.* It's kind of poignant.

So we may think to ourselves, well, everybody knows that everything changes. What's so profound about

that? I know that. Yes, ask the average person, do things change? They'll usually say yes. I tried this experiment once when I was writing my first anicca talk, and people didn't have any trouble agreeing that things change. And then I asked them, "Everything? Does everything change?" This people weren't so sure about. One person said 95% of things change. Other people didn't know what to make of me for asking that question.

But we can miss out on the profundity of this teaching because it seems kind of obvious. The depth and breadth of this truth of anicca and its implications for how we live aren't usually contemplated. For one thing, the speed of change looks different to the untrained worldling than to those who meditate. Harper's Index once asked people—I think Americans—how long does the present last? The consensus was that the present lasted three seconds. That seems really long to me. Maybe to you too.

Well, the Buddha was a bit more refined in his present moments. He said that there are thousands of mind moments in a second. So that's a little different.

There's a Japanese teacher named Jakusho Kwong, and he writes about it like this: "Everything is changing. In one way, it's complete freedom. It is said that there are 6.5 billion instances in 24 hours. And in one second, there are 7,000 instances. As we are sitting here, they are continuously coming and going, continuously coming and going, just like when I strike my stick on the floor. Bam, bam, bam, bam. Isn't that wonderful? This is complete freedom. We see ourselves as firewood going to ash. We see ourselves 30 years old going to 60. My God, look out, here comes 70. We see ourselves only in the linear, the sequential, moving toward an end. We don't understand that within each 24-hour day there are 6.5 billion instances of life, death, life, death, gain, loss, gain, loss, dark, light, bodhisattvas, clouds, cars, you and me. All the dharmas are appearing and disappearing continuously out of the beginningless beginning and the endless end. This is really fantastic. It gives us such a very wide liberating view that to even call it Buddha Dharma or anything else diminishes it."

That's a different feel than three seconds.

So, anicca.

The biggest challenge for us in this life is that things are always changing, that we can't peg things down, make them be like we want them to be. Now, of course, we have influence. I don't want to say that we're completely powerless or that I'm talking about passivity. But yes, we've taken birth in this tough universe. It's tough to navigate because there is this wild speed of change. It's a wild, wild ride, this human life.

You may have noticed this in your meditation. Life or reality is intense because it includes such a wide variety of experiences constantly changing—sometimes described as the 10,000 joys and 10,000 sorrows, or sometimes described as the eight vicissitudes of life: pleasure and pain, loss and gain, praise and blame, fame and disrepute. These eight worldly conditions are always changing. We hope, we wish we could just have the praise or the gain or the pleasure, but it doesn't work that way. That isn't the kind of universe

we've taken birth into. It's a wild ride.

The Buddha said the entire universe is fluid. Everything in conditioned reality, this manifest world, is in a constant state of flux. Nothing in this world escapes this truth. And in meditation, we contact our own experience of heart and mind to see the truth of this reality right within our own experience.

Think about your last sitting. What happened? It was probably a pretty constant experience of change, a process of change. The breath, a pain, a thought, an emotion, hearing, the breath, thinking. Or today—what happened to lunch? It's gone.

I remember my first retreat here. Every day I would look forward to lunch all morning. Thoughts would arise: What's for lunch today? Sometimes I could even smell lunch from the meditation hall, and I'd know what we were having. I'd go in and enjoy lunch, and then somewhere in the middle—usually about two-thirds through—I would realize it's going to end. As you may know, there's not a lot of entertainment around here, so I found that quite disheartening. And then lunch would finish and I'd just sit there. Gone. It's gone. I did that every day. Sometimes we're a little slow as human beings.

So this is the kind of universe we've taken birth into. It's not a picnic. Personally, I think it's a kind of intense universe. What are we going to do with all of this change? I just want to peg it down. Don't you?

So we humans aren't always too excited to hear about this truth of impermanence. If we resist it, if we resist this truth, a lot of fear can arise. And then we even seem to think that there's something wrong if change happens. We seem to believe that we should be able to control change. The computer quits working. Our next sitting isn't as nice as our last sitting. We should be able to get back to that sitting, shouldn't we? There's some kind of unconscious belief that we should be able to do that. But it's not true. This is the kind of universe we live in. Things keep changing.

Ajahn Chah, as you may have noticed, is one of my favorites. He translates Anicca as "uncertain." In his book, *Food for the Heart*, he says, "People say Ajahn Chah only talks about 'not certain.' They get fed up with hearing this and they run away from me. 'We went to listen to Ajahn Chah teach, and all he talked about was not certain.'"

They can't bear to hear the same old thing anymore, so they leave. I guess they are going to look for some place where things will be certain. But they'll be back.

So our practice is a study of anicca. And when we meditate, we put a lot of emphasis on experiencing direct sensations, because on the level that we usually look at life—the more superficial, conceptual level of life—things don't appear to change very much. There can be a fixed perception of life when we live on the conceptual level. What we see on the conceptual level is more our ideas about how life is rather than what's really happening.

When we get close, as we do in meditation, we see this constant process of change. We may have an idea

of a headache, and it seems fairly fixed—it doesn't have that sense that it's always changing. We think we have a headache and it's lasting and lasting and lasting. But if we get close to this experience of headache, what do we see? We may see pulsing and throbbing and movement and intensification and lessening. Constant change is what we see when we get close to life.

So even if we're using an anchor a lot in practice, as I mentioned the other day, we relate to it by seeing change. If we're with the breath, we're with the actual experience of the sensations of breathing through the in-breath and the out-breath. And what we'll notice is change. That's one of the reasons that for Vipassana meditation, counting breaths isn't considered Vipassana—because the counting is more on the conceptual level. We want to get close to the actual experience. This is why concentration practices aren't Vipassana, because they aim to fix attention or to fix reality. With Vipassana meditation, we want to see things as they are, which means constantly changing.

And so then we notice in our meditation this thing that we call ourself. The five aggregates: body, form, feelings, consciousness, volitional formations, perceptions. What happens when we check this out? Again, we see this process of constant change—changing sensations, changing perceptions, changing feeling tone, rolling on and on. Where is the fixed, solid me?

When the Buddha, in a number of discourses, was contemplating with his monks whether something could be called self or not, he would ask two questions. One was: does it change? And: can you control it? Does it change? If it changes, how can you call it self? How can you make it into something fixed, independent, permanent? And can you control it?

I don't know if we relate to this second one. I think the change one we can relate to more. But over the years, I relate more to this control one. There's a certain uncontrollability. Somebody mentioned it in interviews today. This mind—we want to control it, but can we? If it were me, wouldn't I be able to control it?

So if you really want to understand not-self, just go for anicca. Notice impermanence. Notice how it all changes. Rolling on and on.

As I said, when we resist this truth of change, a lot of fear arises in our practice, in our lives, in our minds and hearts. But when we don't resist the truth of change, when we can relax into this constant flow of life, we see that we live in an amazing universe. We relax into don't know. This world of change is fresh and vivid and amazing. It's really the only way to be alive, because life is change. Not that there's change in this world, but that the very fabric of life is change. The very nature of this world is change. We couldn't have this universe without it.

Lin Jensen, another one of my favorite Buddhist authors, describes it this way: "Life is just a collective term for the movement the universe makes, which is to say that life is a manifestation of impermanence. Even solid rock in its apparent impenetrable fixity gradually disperses towards delight. If it did not,

there'd be no soil, no flower, no pollinating insect, no grazing or browsing animals or bird or human. Whatever delight you and I have ever experienced is the gift of broken rock."

Impermanence is also the true meaning of the word emptiness. We hear the word emptiness in the teachings and we think "void," and it can bring up fear. But the true meaning of emptiness is that we live in a world that's awesome and mysterious and alive and indescribable and vast and vibrant and full of possibility. That's what anicca also means.

However, it doesn't always feel that way when we are dealing with change. So in practice, we get interested in how we relate to change.

A number of years ago, I was the Buddhist advisor at Mount Holyoke College, not far from here. One day I was talking to the young women there about anicca, and I was saying, "So everything changes. Why does that matter in Buddhism? Why do we care about that?" One of the young women said, "Because that's basically the way things are, and if you have issues with this, you need to deal with them." That kind of sums up the meditation practice. We're looking at our issues with change. And believe me, we have some. I think you probably know that.

All of these billions of mind moments that Kwong described means that we're constantly being hurled into the unknown. There's so much openness in that, in the truth of change. Can we hold that much openness? Not always. That's what we investigate in our practice.

The heart-mind develops strategies to deal with this truth of vulnerability that we feel in the face of all this change. Our deeply conditioned strategies for dealing with change are known as the three roots of suffering: delusion, aversion, and grasping, which you've heard a little bit about. These three roots of suffering are really about controlling—trying to control the truth of change in this world. We'll look at them briefly before moving on.

The slipperiest of these three roots of suffering is delusion, or ignorance. There are many different ways we could look at it, but in the sense I'm talking about it here, if we can't handle the truth of change, we live at a slight remove from life. We can't connect fully. Another part is that we don't see life as it is. Delusion is not seeing life as it is—seeing it as we want it to be, or as we perceive it to be on a superficial level, seeing permanence where impermanence is true. There's a certain sense in this protective strategy of delusion, a sense of denial about the truth of life.

You could say the biggest manifestation of impermanence is death. It's as if we don't believe we'll die. That could be an aspect of delusion. It's really quite incredible how often we don't think we'll die when it's the truth of everything.

I turned fifty a couple of years ago, and I spent my fiftieth birthday at the crematorium of somebody who was dear to me. It was an amazing fiftieth birthday, and I think about it a lot since then. But before that, I'm not sure how much I thought about it.

A number of years ago, I took my goddaughter on a trip for her graduation. Afterwards, she was showing me the pictures from the trip, and there was this one picture. She was standing next to this woman who had a lot of white hair. My first thought was, "Who is that woman?" It was me. There's some delusion there, thinking that I look like I looked twenty years ago rather than recognizing that's me—I have white hair now. It was so interesting to watch the mind look and wonder, "Who is that person?" Delusion. Denial.

This protective strategy of delusion denies the truth of how things are, or holds us at a slight remove from life so that we don't really see the truth of how things are. And out of that, we have the other two control strategies: attachment and aversion, or grasping and aversion.

So we try to micromanage life, thinking that we can make it satisfying. We hold on, or try to hold on, to what's pleasant, and we push away, or try to get rid of, what's unpleasant. This is the human answer to the question of happiness—that maybe if I just try hard enough, I'll get it right.

The major advantage of this micromanaging, this clinging with its aspects of attachment and aversion, is that it gives us the illusion of control. It feels like security to us. It's kind of like magical thinking. If I stay attached, I'll have more control over the outcome.

We all do this. I can watch it when I'm flying somewhere and there's a canceled flight. I'll look at the board, and first of all, there will be denial. It's not true. It's not canceled. But after that, I'll keep looking at the board because I keep thinking if I look at it enough times, it won't be canceled. It's the attachment. There's this illusion that somehow through the attachment, I'm going to be able to control whether my flight was canceled or not. It gives us that illusion of control. And we humans, as much as we wish for freedom, also have this deep wish for security and for control.

I was teaching in April in Ohio, and I had a younger friend with me who was assisting me, a mentee. I was talking with her at dinner—I think I was giving a similar talk to this one—and I was talking with her about clinging. She said, "I like clinging. It makes me feel better. Kind of."

That was such a great summary. "I like clinging. It makes me feel better." The clincher is the "kind of" part. There's a way that it seems to make us feel better, but it has such a high price. That's the "kind of" part—the price of the bound heart, the bound mind. It doesn't lead to peace. We know that.

So we all have our favorite control strategy. Of course, we use all three. But reality always wins. Anicca wins. That's the way this world is. And when we rely on these control strategies, there's one big problem: there's no place to rest.

A few years ago, I was teaching in Burma, and we had a question and answer period. One woman raised her hand and simply asked, "Where can we rest?" Such a poignant question for all of us. Where can we rest? Well, it's clear we can't rest with grasping, aversion, or delusion.

So the greatest disappointment leading to peace is the truth that we can't control this world or this life. We live in a world of constant change, which means we live in a world of uncertainty, of unknowing. Sometimes this bums me out. That was the way I was planning on solving the human predicament—through control. But it doesn't work.

So we make a study in our practice of how we relate to change. That's our whole practice, really. We notice how we try to control, fixate, make this world known and secure. And then we notice when we can let go—let go of clinging. I love to watch my mind when something changes that I'm not happy about. I get very interested and curious to see what it will do and how long it will take to accept the truth of the way things are.

It's easy to lose earrings. Most of the women here, those who wear earrings, can probably relate. So at first, the earring's lost and you can't find it. At first there's denial, usually—it's not lost. And then after the denial passes, it's like, "Oh, I really liked that earring"—attachment. And there is this kind of hidden belief that somehow liking that earring and wanting it will make it come back. And then at a certain point, it's gone. And we can feel the release of the attachment, the tension leave. It feels good. It feels good to let go.

That's just a small example, but we have so many examples because life is changing so much. We have so many chances to notice how we relate to change. Just think back to the good sitting, right? You had the good sitting, and the next time you come back, sitting's not so good. You believe if you hang on enough, you'll have that good sitting that you had before. How long does it take? Be curious. How long does it take into the sitting when you say, "Oh, this is the way things are right now"? And then it feels good. It feels good to let go.

The Buddha taught—and this is the good news—the Buddha taught that understanding impermanence frees the heart and the mind. In chapter twenty of the Dhammapada, he says, "Everything changes, nothing stays the same. Having gained this awareness, one is free from suffering. This is the way of purification. All conditioned things are subject to change. Having fully learned this insight, one is freed from suffering. This is the way of purification."

That's a pretty bold and definitive statement—that through going deeply into the truth of change, this is the way to free the heart and the mind. So we study clinging or letting go in the face of change, seeing what happens in our practice.

There may be times you're sitting in your practice and you just notice some contraction of heart and mind. You turn the awareness towards it and it dissipates. Sometimes that happens—awareness is strong and it vanishes. Sometimes that's all that the heart and mind is interested in: Is there clinging? Is there contraction? Or is there non-clinging, freedom from contraction?

And then sometimes when the attachment is stronger, it takes a long time. It's a process. It can take months, even years for certain attachments, right? A big loss, a loss of a loved one. I read somewhere—I

don't think it's ascribed to any certain person—but the quote is, "Everything I've let go of has claw marks all over it." Those claw marks are the attachment, the clinging. And sometimes it's like that.

I read a great book called *The Year of Magical Thinking* by Joan Didion, and it was about the year after her husband's death. They'd been married for decades. I love the title, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, because basically she was talking about this whole process of attachment and letting go. She didn't use those words exactly, but she would talk about things such as going into a room and expecting her husband to be there. She called it magical thinking—all the ways that the mind tried to deal with the enormity of her loss, the different ways of, you could say, delusion and attachment. She didn't use those words, but she was really interested in the process. That was one of the beauties of it. She was curious. She wanted to just see, see what was happening.

That's what we do in our meditation practice. So when the attachment is

When the attachment is deeper, stronger, we let ourselves go through the process, whatever it is—the anger, denial, craving, grief. We let it move through, and we find in our own time that peace comes, understanding, acceptance, freedom, compassion. We let awareness of the process do the work. The awareness and our intention to be free do the work. Eventually we get that things change.

A number of years ago I was in an organization, and things changed. Part of the change meant that I needed to resign my position. I hadn't done anything wrong, that wasn't it, but I needed to resign so that I could let people figure out things without my influence. It just needed to be that way. It was a really hard process for me, a number of months. I was very attached to this group and to my place in it, and I had to let it all go. There were a lot of claw marks. There was grief and anger and resentment and a bunch of feelings, but I just let myself be with them. I let myself feel them. I trusted the process of awareness.

I remember the day it shifted. It shifted when I had this thought: Did I think it wouldn't change? And I was like, oh, this is life. This is how life is. And then that was when I was able to let go and be at peace. Did I think it wasn't going to change?

So in our practice, we study how we try to control the world. Where is there tightening? How do we let go? How does letting go happen? It might be little things like breakfast and bagels. Bagels are pleasant, perhaps, and we can enjoy the pleasantness, but when does grasping enter? When do we try to not have that experience end? Or we're sitting in the hall and we're having a fine sitting, and then some noise starts, a certain sound starts. How do we respond to that change? Is there aversion? Or are we able to let go? This is the way things are right now. Even in a yogi life, there are endless opportunities for seeing how we relate to change.

All of the challenges that we get, whether it's a little thing like bagels or a big thing like a major loss in our lives, we see that these challenges are the teachers that we need. Charlotte Joko Beck says, "Life happens to be a severe and endlessly kind teacher. It's the only authority you need to trust." And this teacher, this

authority is everywhere. Life is always offering us opportunities to learn.

So we get interested in our issues with change. We notice how the heart and mind feel with the grasping and aversion, how clinging feels, and then we notice how the heart and mind of non-clinging or letting go feel. We practice clinging with awareness and we practice non-clinging with awareness. Which one feels better? We check it out for ourselves. We see for ourselves.

As I mentioned in the other talk I gave, health problems can be a great teacher of letting go. Our body challenges of all kinds—aging, health, sickness. This has been one of my great teachers, one of those severe and endlessly kind teachers in my own practice.

A number of years ago, I got a flu shot and about four days afterwards, I started having neurological symptoms on one side of my body—numbness and tingling and things like that. So I went to the doctor and I said, "Do you think this could have anything to do with the flu shot?" And she said no, no. They were all worried that I had something rather severe. They did their initial assessment, couldn't find anything, and they were talking about pretty severe illnesses.

And so then they sent me to the neurologist. And the neurologist said, "Oh, it looks like you had an autoimmune reaction to the flu shot." He said if that's what it was, it would clear up in about eighteen months to two years.

So basically, I was sitting there with certain symptoms, and I had no idea if it was something that was going to resolve in eighteen months or two years, or if I had the beginnings of a very challenging and difficult neurological disease. And I wasn't going to know for months, because it would be slow to heal if it was the autoimmune reaction.

Meditating during that time was fascinating. It was really fascinating just to watch what my mind did with the situation. It would try to manage it. The first thing would be to imagine the worst. "Okay, it's going to be that. It's going to be one of those diseases that they mentioned." And then I would go over in my mind, "Okay, I can deal with that. I'll be able to deal with that." And then I'd go to the other side: "The neurologist knows more than the primary care physician, so he's probably right. This is going to clear up and I'm going to be okay." The mind would go back and forth, back and forth—lots of fear, resistance to the truth of that moment.

And then, at a certain point, I started to get good at surrendering to the truth of the moment. And the truth of the moment was that I really didn't know. Uncertainty. So I started to investigate what uncertainty feels like. And I found that when I could rest in this uncertainty, really rest there, the world was wide open. There were no problems. Anything could happen. It was vibrant and alive and completely okay. That was a place I could rest—I could rest in the truth of uncertainty. Surrender. It took the surrender into that truth of uncertainty. Usually we try surrender as a last resort. It's not usually our first move. But hopefully we get there.

Anyway, after a number of months, it started to improve, and in about eighteen months or two years, more or less, it resolved—just so you know the end of the story.

It taught me so much. I mean, we're always in that place, really, all of us. Uncertainty. As Ajahn Chah says, "Just say 'uncertain.'" If it's pleasant, say "uncertain." If it's unpleasant, say "uncertain." Just notice beginning, ending—how everything arises and passes away. This is the truth of life. And sometimes it just takes a kind of serious diagnosis or something to really bring that to our awareness, or a serious loss, perhaps. And we learn how to relax into this truth of life, this vulnerability in the face of change.

So what happens when we stay with this process of change? First of all, there's the learning to let go. We learn that attachment doesn't work and it's not worth the price. That delusion of control that we get isn't worth the price. The way I was working with that diagnosis, trying to find some place that I could hang on to—it wasn't working. So that's what we learn. And we learn the freedom of the heart that doesn't hang on, that lets go. And I'm not talking about hanging on to the thing. I'm talking about hanging on to the attachment. The thing's gone anyway. It's going to go away. Everything's always going, going, going anyway. But what we're letting go of is the holding on. So that's one part.

The other thing that happens when we stay with this process of change is that we come to a place of compassion in this world. We start to see and understand that all of life is borrowed, that nothing is guaranteed.

And we start to understand that we all share this. All beings share this truth. And a great compassion for all of life can arise out of relaxing into this truth.

Life is impregnated with loss. One way we might choose to deal with that is through detachment or disconnect. This is the path we choose if we can't deal with reality. But the other way that we can deal with it is the path of love. It means that we connect with this world, with experience, and we love it even knowing we'll have to let it go. That's our challenge. That's the challenge of the open heart.

I like to read the poetry of Pablo Neruda. In his last year of life, he wrote a book of poems. They're not all finished—there were some fragments. This is one that came from that final year. He knew that he was dying:

We, the mortals, touch the metals, the wind, the ocean shores, the stones, knowing they will go on inert or burning. And I was discovering, naming all these things. It was my destiny to love and say goodbye.

It was my destiny to love and say goodbye. That's our destiny in this world. What I love about that poem is this sense of fully experiencing the world through the senses, that connectedness, and that understanding that none of it can be held on to. We must say goodbye over and over again. We develop a mature love for this world that acknowledges this truth.

So in our practice, we study change and how we relate to it. There's no correct answer. It's not about

trying to make acceptance happen—you can't do that. But it is about being curious and nonjudgmental in our awareness, our attention, our mindfulness. And inviting in the sense of mettā, our kindness. Mettā softens the hard edges of control. It offers us a certain protection in its inclusivity, in how large our hearts can get. It's a better protection than delusion, grasping, and aversion. We can hold this process of change with softness and with kindness.

So in our practice, watching all that arises pass away, developing the insight that comes from seeing this for ourselves—not from thinking about it. Thinking doesn't do it. It's from being with the process of change itself.

I still remember the first moment that I felt like somehow this truth pierced my consciousness. It was on retreat here, and I was reaching for a doorknob. It can happen at any moment—it doesn't have to be on the cushion. I was reaching for a doorknob, and as I touched it, I had this realization that that moment was gone. It was never going to come back. It was never going to be replayed. It would never be the same. I went into Joseph and told him about it, and he said, "And did you notice that for the next moment too?" I was like, no—the next moment I was thinking about that moment.

Letting go gives us a flexible heart and mind. Enlightenment could be described as the heart and mind that are totally flexible, stuck nowhere. Letting go feels good. It's like taking off a tight shoe. That's what we're doing in practice—we're taking off the tight shoes of our hearts and minds over and over again. It's a release of struggle, a release of contraction. It's freedom.

We meet this truth that all things change, that all that arises passes away. And the heart and mind slowly begin to learn that knowing this truth deeply brings the greatest kind of happiness—the happiness of peace, non-clinging, letting go.

Ajahn Chah said, "All that I have learned in the many years that I've been a monk, I can sum up in one sentence: All that arises passes away. This I know."

It's remarkable—this is essentially the same teaching as Suzuki Roshi. It seems that all these masters summed up practice in the same way. Everything changes. All that arises passes away.

The importance of understanding change, making peace with change, and thereby letting go is reflected in the Buddha's last words—his reported last words. His final teaching pointed to understanding anicca as a path to liberation. He said, "All conditioned things arise and pass away. Work out your liberation with diligence."

So you have your instructions.

All conditioned things arise and pass away. Work out your liberation with diligence.

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