

Ruth King
Week 3, *Ungripping the Heart and Mind*
March 20, 2017
“Nothing is Permanent, Personal, or Perfect”



Last week we practiced intimacy with our impulses by using *vedana* as a practice of inquiry around our experiences and our sensations. [We investigated whether] they were pleasant, unpleasant or neither, and we talked about how useful that can be. I hope you've discovered that it can be useful to pause and know what we are experiencing more deeply, and also [to know] what's driving our actions and feeding and fueling our emotions. I hope you found that practice useful.

The first week we looked at cultivating calmness through the body and the breath. [This is] a way of having a foundation—an inner refuge of calmness and ease—as a baseline for rest and refuge. This week, I'd like to continue by having us take a look at what the Buddhist teachings refer to as the three marks of existence: *anicca*, *anatta*, and *dukkha*. For this teaching, I'm calling it “nothing is personal, permanent or perfect.”

I'd like to have us take that kind of playful mantra into this inquiry to support us in not being so gripped. I'd like to refer to Buddhist teachings on the Vipallasa Sutta, which look at the misperception of the mind. This has to do with how we perceive. Each perception that we have comes with thoughts and emotions that then drive a certain view or belief. [This occurs] in our practice of [staying with] with whatever arises, or even as we're looking at difficulties or finding ourselves in struggles. [This is] especially [relevant] in this political climate, where so many people are gripped.

So much is driven by the perceptions we have, and also how those perceptions feed certain thoughts and emotions. When repeated with regularity, they become a view that we hold tightly to, one that feeds the grip of heart and mind. It's useful to look at how this happens. I'm thinking of one example when I was being driven to the airport in Charlottesville after doing a mindful training. We got to this intersection. I looked up and there was a sign that said "Barack Avenue." I [thought], “Gee, look at this very progressive city that has a street named after the president: Barack Avenue!” I could hardly stand on my feet. I was all excited.



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I had positive thoughts about that, and there were all kinds of emotions that arose as a result. Then the belief was solidified around [the thought that] this is a progressive city. I was off and rolling. Then I mentioned something to the woman who was driving me to the airport. I said, "How incredible. There's a street here named after the president." The woman who was driving was silent for a minute. Then she said to me, "Well, in these parts we call that Barracks Avenue, not Barack."

I was so convinced that it was Barack. Yet, I didn't have it right. It shifted everything. In that moment, I felt sobered to be kind of shocked out of my conviction—a conviction that was feeling good. It was pleasant. It had a vedana of pleasance associated with it, but I was wrong. I was wrong. It wasn't Barack; it was Barracks Avenue. There are times when we can just begin to notice the [shock] of being awakened in those moments, but we should also not be so surprised by it. When these things happen, it's [all about] perception, right?

It's not like it's personal. It's not like the thought I have about it is so permanent and perfect that I have to stick to it. It just doesn't work like that. There was a release of the perception and the whole sense of the personal solidifying. That can often happen with the perceptions that we have. We think they're personal. We think they should be perfect, or they should be the way we like it. We think they should be permanent. I imagine that if I hadn't said anything to the woman who was driving me, I would have been convinced that how I saw [the sign] was the way I saw it and it was to my liking.

So, what's next? This practice of looking at nothing as personal, nothing as permanent, and nothing as perfect is a really profound teaching. We don't have the time to go deeply into it, but we can begin to bring the question into our practice. What am I perceiving? What am I believing to be personal? What am I believing to be perfect? What am I believing is so solid that it's going to be here forever?

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This is a profound relationship with our sense of wanting and not wanting. This is another way to enter into inquiry with our experiences, to relax our awareness, and to be okay about being curious about what we think we know, or curious about the perceptions that we have. This is just a sliver of truth. It's never the absolute truth.

Let's practice together. I invite you to take a posture of relaxed awareness. Invite the body to relax. Because you've been practicing with cultivating calm, maybe the access to it is more readily recognizable. Open to calm and allow yourself to rest there. Also notice the *vedana* of experience right now. Is it pleasant? Unpleasant? Neither? Take your time to open your awareness inwardly in a relaxed way.

Reflect on a recent incident or situation when you felt really gripped, agitated, or irritated. Maybe it was with someone close to you, or maybe it is a recurring pattern toward yourself that you find yourself in. Maybe it was [when you were] watching the news. Just get that incident in your mind and see what's happening there. See the scene play out in your mind. Notice the *vedana*, the feeling tone that's there as you observe what's happening.

You can name and note. Name what's happening. [Are you] hurt, gripped, or angry? Then name the *vedana* pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. Just take a minute or so. As you touch into this recollection, allow yourself to be aware of the *vedana*. As you observe what's happening, begin to invite the three questions. Do I believe this is personal? Do I believe what's happening is happening is personally addressed to me? Am I taking this personally?

Again, ask the question and then notice what happens. Don't look for an answer; just ask the question. Am I taking this to be personal? Is that absolutely true? Stay connected to the body and the breath as you invite this inquiry. You may ask [these questions]: am I taking this to be permanent? Do I believe this is going to be forever or always? Am I perceiving it this way? Is it absolutely true that this will be forever?

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Again, without judgment—just curiosity—notice what happens in the body as you ask these questions. [Notice] what happens in the mind. Notice if there's a sense of release or opening. Or maybe more tightening. Just notice and allow. Ask the third question: am I believing this should be perfect—the way I want it to be—and to my liking? Am I believing this should be other than how it is? Just notice what it's like to believe that your experience should be other than what it is right now. Notice what that's like.

Can you let this be? Can you let this experience be what it is? Allow it. Let go. Allow some space to be with you. Take your time to just check out the scene now and notice how your heart and body feel as you revisit the situation of grip-ness. You may notice that things have changed because impermanence is all there is. Everything changes. Notice how you've changed just from bearing witness to this inquiry.

Stay aware of the body and the breath. Bring kind attention as you ask these questions. Know nothing is personal, permanent or perfect. This is a practice. This is something we can drop into our daily meditation practice and inquire how we're holding our experiences. It's a way of inviting ourselves to reexamine misperception and put a bit more space around what we feel absolute about. It's a beautiful practice that supports us in lightening up and giving us a break from the grip of perception and conditioning.

Continue this practice over the week. Ask the questions, both on the cushion and when you find yourself in a gripped situation, a conflict, or whenever you feel really strongly about an opinion that you're looking at. Just back off and see how you're holding that experience. [Notice] if you're misperceiving by thinking it's permanent. [Notice if you think] it should be perfect or [believe] that it's personal. See if you can reframe that. I'll see you next week for our final session together. Thank you.