Not-Self and Selfing

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 1:02:27

The Buddha in his conversations with his followers often talked about how our minds get caught in different ways at different times. I'd like to start this evening by sharing one of those teachings.

He begins this teaching by describing one of the ways in which an ordinary person relates to experience. You might recall that when we talked about feeling tone, I mentioned a text in which the Buddha also described how an ordinary person—I think "ordinary worldling" was the translation that was used there—how they relate to feeling tone. Here he's talking about how an ordinary person attends to things.

He says an ordinary person—this is someone who's not met the teachings, who doesn't practice—does not understand what things are fit for attention and what things are unfit for attention. Since that is so, they attend to those things unfit for attention and do not attend to those things fit for attention.

This is how they attend unwisely: "Was I in the past? Was I not in the past? What was I in the past? How was I in the past? Having been what, what did I become in the past? Shall I be in the future? Shall I not be in the future? What shall I be in the future? How shall I be in the future? Having been what, what shall I become in the future?" Or else they are inwardly perplexed about the present thus: "Am I? Am I not? What am I? How am I? Where has this being come from? Where will it go?"

These thoughts, this way of attending—I think you get the drift—attending through the sense or the perspective of I, of I-me.

He goes on to say that when they attend unwisely in this way, one of six views arises. The view "self exists for me" arises as true and established. Or the view "no self exists for me" arises as true and established—that one's interesting. There, the Buddha points to this view of no self as being one of these six views that arises. Or the view "I perceive self with self" arises. Or the view "I perceive not-self with self" arises. Or the view "I perceive self with not-self" arises. Or else they have some such view as this: "It is this self of mine that speaks and feels and experiences here and there the results of good and bad actions. But this self of mine is permanent, everlasting, eternal, not subject to change and will endure as long as eternity."

This, he said, is called the thicket of views, the wilderness of views, the contortion of views. The untaught ordinary person is not freed from suffering, being caught in this thicket of views.

This kind of habitual way we have of meeting experience through the perspective of self, the Buddha says, inclines us towards these different views of self. Caught by this perspective of self, he says there's a direct connection with suffering.

I'll read another teaching, because this sense of questioning—he's saying here that pretty much any view at all around the self, any way you can even think about having a view of the self: I perceive self with not-self, I perceive self with self, I perceive not-self with self—all of these are mistaken understandings, he says.

And so the question arises, and has arisen for thousands of years, something along the lines of: well, okay, if there's no self, then who feels? Or who decides? This kind of question has come up in some of our meetings. So I thought I'd read a story of an exchange between the Buddha and someone with questions along these lines, so we can hear how the Buddha responds to this kind of question.

The questioner asks the Buddha, "Venerable Sir, who feels?"

"Not a valid question," the Blessed One replied. "I do not say one feels. If I should say one feels, in that case this would be a valid question. But I do not speak thus. If one should ask me, 'Venerable Sir, with what as condition does feeling come to be?' This would be a valid question."

To this the valid answer is, "With contact as condition, feeling comes to be. With feeling as condition, craving."

And this person, not quite getting it, asks next, "Venerable Sir, who craves?"

"Not a valid question," the Blessed One replies.

I'll skip some of it, but basically: with feeling as condition, craving comes to be; with craving as condition, clinging; with clinging as condition, becoming.

And so the Buddha is really pointing to this question around "Who is feeling? Who is experiencing?" It's not really relevant here. It's not the way, the understanding of the way things are happening in our experience.

To me, this way of responding to the question is really pointing to the conditioned nature of our experience—that we are just this conditioning tumbling on. That's all that is happening. Conditions arising, passing away. Conditions arising, giving rise to other conditions, giving rise to other conditions. This is what this being... I won't say this is what this being *is*, but this is how this being *happens*. Maybe I could say that. This is how this being happens. We are more a happening.

One philosopher, Buckminster Fuller—I thought of this today and went and looked on the internet. The internet is great this way; you can find pretty much anything. I remembered this from when I was a teenager. I read a book by Buckminster Fuller called *I Seem to Be a Verb* and wanted to get the whole quote. So here's what he says:

"I live on earth at present and I don't know what I am. I know that I'm not a category. I'm not a thing. I'm not a noun. I seem to be a verb, an evolutionary process, an integral function of the universe."

That's what we are. We are functioning. We are functionings—human functionings, human happenings. We could say, instead of a being, human happenings.

So I'd like to briefly give some analogies, some senses of how to understand this teaching of not-self in a more analogical way. Because there's nothing really out there that's a thing. We know through just our understanding, to some extent, of the way physics works, that there's no stasis anywhere—that there's just this continual flux of particles. And yet we congeal into the sense of something. We congeal, we put on top of experience, that things are things, including ourself.

And so one analogy, thinking about this happening as a conditioned set of arisings—an arising that comes with a set of conditions—a good analogy for this is a rainbow. A rainbow seems to kind of, sort of be a thing, although it's very ephemeral. When I was a kid, I was shocked that you could actually take a picture of a rainbow. It's got some kind of happening going on, for sure. But it's this confluence of conditions that makes that happening, that has that happening be realized, that makes that happening arise. There's moisture in the air. There's sun that has to be hitting those drops of moisture. And then there needs to be an observer.

I think anytime there is sun and water in the air, at some place there will be a rainbow—whether it's landing anywhere. There would be the possibility of a rainbow if there was somebody standing in the right place to see it. But it really does need the observer.

I actually decided to look this up on the internet to see how rainbows work. And one of the things I thought was really cool was this: it said that a rainbow doesn't actually exist in the way that we think it exists, because you cannot approach it as a thing. You cannot walk up to a rainbow. If you walk up to a rainbow, it may appear that the rainbow is staying the same distance from you. Every step you take towards the rainbow, basically what's happening is you're seeing a new rainbow. Because the distance from those water droplets is essential in terms of the refraction and where we are. The distance is essential. So we take a step, and we're seeing the water droplets refracted just a step further.

It doesn't exist in the way we think it exists as something out there. It's this confluence of conditions.

At one point I was doing a self-retreat. A friend of mine let me use their cabin on the Oregon coast this past January, and I was there during a really stormy time, so some of the waves were enormous. I was up on a cliff seventy-five feet above the ocean, but some of the waves were breaking and spraying water up above the seventy-five foot mark of the cliff. As I stood there one afternoon, each time the wave broke and sent up this shower of water, I saw a rainbow appear in the air in front of me. Sometimes I could see the rainbow appear and vanish and appear and vanish and appear and vanish as wafts of mist went through that area. It was very interesting to see. It looked like the rainbow was hovering there just waiting to be revealed. But it's the conditions that come together.

And so the sense of self is kind of like that. It is conditions that are interpreted as I or me or mine.

In another discourse of the Buddha—one that Sally mentioned the other night, the second discourse of the Buddha—the Buddha really began to unpack this teaching of not-self with respect to the five aggregates. I want to give you a little bit of a flavor of this text.

With respect to each of the five aggregates, the first thing that the Buddha points to is this aspect of how we think of a sense of self as being something that has control—control over our experience, control over what we feel or think or do. This is a very common way to have a sense of "I am." I'm the one who chooses, I'm the one who feels, I'm the one who thinks. The sense that I should be able to make things happen the way I want them to. This notion is a very common way to impute a sense of self—the sense of agency, the sense of control.

The Buddha points to this as what we actually see when we really go through our lives. Over and over again, we have staring us in the face this kind of truth of not-self. Only we don't see it because we have views and beliefs that we're holding to. We're looking at our experience through those views and beliefs and thinking, for instance, something like, "Well, I should have control over my thoughts," or "I should have control over my emotions. Why can't I just stop myself from doing this thing over and over again?" We think we're failing, we think we're a failure, we think somebody is doing something to us—as opposed to recognizing that this is simply an aspect of not-self staring us in the face, that we don't have this kind of control.

So the Buddha said—I'll just read a couple of these to give you the flavor. Form is one of the five aggregates: form, feeling, perception, mental formations, consciousness. Form refers primarily to the body but also to all physical form.

"Form is not self. If form were self, the body would not lend itself to affliction, and it would be possible to say of the body, 'Let my body be thus. Let my body not be thus.' But because form is not self, it is not possible to say, 'Let my body be thus. Let my body not be thus.'"

Mental formations are not self. Mental formations include all of our emotions, our mind states, things like mindfulness, anger, frustration. I'm going to read through this with a couple of examples.

"Anger is not self. If anger were self, anger would not lead to affliction, and it would be possible to say of anger, 'Let my anger be thus. Let my anger not be thus.' But because anger is not self, anger leads to affliction, and it is not possible to say of it, 'Let my anger be thus. Let my anger not be thus.'"

"Mindfulness is not self. If mindfulness were self, it would be possible to determine of mindfulness, 'May my mindfulness be thus. May my mindfulness not be thus.' But mindfulness is not self. Therefore it is not possible to say of mindfulness, 'May my mindfulness be thus. May my mindfulness not be thus.'"

That's a little bit of a relief.

It's also a way we suffer, isn't it? A lot of us suffer over this, thinking we should be in control of the mind.

So this notion of control is one of the main ways that we tend to impute a sense of self. And when we see that we do not have control, rather than taking this to be a personal failing, we might remind ourselves: not self. No control, not self. This is not self. Mindfulness is not self. Self-judgment is not self. Frustration is not self.

So that's one piece of this teaching, this notion. And the Buddha pulls out this aspect of control particularly for us to examine. Then for each of the aggregates, he reminded his followers—he actually engaged them in a dialogue. He said, "So form, body—is form permanent or impermanent?" They said, "Well, it's impermanent." And he says, "Well, okay, so what is impermanent—reliable or unreliable?" "Well, it's unreliable." "Is what is impermanent and unreliable fitting to be called self?" And he went through this with each of the aggregates.

Because the aggregates are impermanent and unreliable, they tend to lead to dukkha. They lead to dukkha when they are clung to. In the time of the Buddha, one of the understandings or definitions of what self is—the self we are aspiring towards—was a self that is permanent and blissful. So in this situation, he was most likely speaking to people who held this perspective, that the self worth aspiring towards is permanent and blissful. And what the Buddha says is, you cannot find anything in your experience that is reliable and blissful all the time. So is that worthy of being called self? And those followers of the Buddha responded, "Well, I guess not. I guess it's not worthy of being called self."

But for us, maybe that's not the sense of self that we connect with—that idea of some permanent, stable, blissful entity that we're shooting for, merging with some kind of oneness. Maybe that's not our view or worldview. But what I think this teaching is partly asking us to do, what I read in this instruction, is the Buddha saying, "Well, what is your definition of a sense of self? What do you take to be self?" And then start looking at it. Is it what you think it is?

A sense of self we usually do impute some kind of solidity to, some kind of stability to, some kind of ongoingness to. Some of that comes from a sense of memory and continuity, from remembering what we've done. So there's some sense of stability, some sort of something that's traveling through time. But what is that? What is that experience?

To me, one of the things this teaching points to is: whatever you think of as self, start looking at it. Because that's what the Buddha had them do in this sutta. What is it that you call self? Something permanent and blissful? Okay, let's look at our experience. Is there anything you can experience that's permanent, that's going to be here forever? Nothing found in our process of humanness is permanent.

So this exploration—how does the practice help us to shift from this idea of not-self, or anatta, the Pali term that's often translated as not-self? And I like that translation, "not-self" as opposed to "no-self," because "no self" tends to have us reify this idea that there is no self—which was one of those views the Buddha said leads to suffering. This notion of "there is no self" established as the way it is—he says that's a view that leads to suffering.

Thanissaro Bhikkhu, I think, is the one who really brought in this use of "not-self," which to me speaks to: what do we call self? What do we take to be self? And the "not" in front of it says, well, it's not what we think it is.

It's not that. What do you think self is? Well, it's not that. And how about this? Nope, not that either.

So the exploration here isn't to try to pick up this idea or teaching of not-self or no-self and walk around saying, "I'm a no-self," or even "I'm a not-self"—to kind of overlay that teaching or that idea onto our experience and try to not have a sense of self. Because good luck with that.

Our practice really is to see: What is it that we are calling self? What are we taking to be I or me or mine? In this moment, are you the one that's listening? Are you the one that's a meditator? What are you taking to be I or me or mine right now? There can often be some subtle thing there.

One famous quote by the Zen master Dogen: "To study the way is to study the self." That's our work—study these senses of self, get to know what the experience is. "To study the self is to forget the self." My understanding of this teaching is that our work is to study what we think of as a sense of self. As we explore that, there's a very natural understanding that arises: "Hmm, I thought that was self, but it kind of showed itself to be not that." So a very natural unfolding of this study is that we begin to understand in a different way than a kind of intellectual thinking. We begin to understand this teaching of not-self in an experiential way. "To forget the self is to be enlightened by all things."

To study the way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be enlightened by all things.

And so to study the self—this is the exploration of what do I call I or me or mine.

There are different ways we may experience a sense of self. Get familiar with how you experience a sense of self. Sometimes it might be that we see a sense of self kind of congealing, a strong sense of identity coming into being, and we recognize something about a sense of self. Or we might notice—and I think this was more of an earlier understanding for me—seeing a sense of self shifting. Having a kind of identity around some aspect of who I was, and then something else happened, and in a split second there was another identity, like a flip off of one and a flip on of another.

On one three-month course—I think it was my first three-month course—I was reactive to the questions that were asked in the hall, the live questions in the hall. And by one person in particular. I got very argumentative in my mind with this person about their questions. And I spent some time out in front of the meditation hall, outside on the driveway, walking up and down and feeling into that sense of "I am right." I know how these questions should be asked, or whatever I was thinking. I was this identity, this very familiar—really, really familiar—analytical person. I was forty at the time, twenty years ago. Analytical Andrea arose. And it was suffering. I could feel the suffering of it. So I was walking up and down and feeling that suffering, trying to understand, doing a little bit of the microscope thing, trying to

figure out this sense of self. But I was just watching it and feeling the suffering of it, basically.

And then this truck drove up. It was one of those lunchtime things. The truck drove up and stopped in front of the building, and the brakes squealed, and the door slammed. And my mind immediately flipped from this forty-year-old analytical, argumentative person to a two-year-old that was like, "Ooh!" And I was just reveling—I was standing there feeling the bangs and the big bursts of sound, and rapture was just going through me.

In a second.

That was interesting, because that sense of self had seemed so solid, so there. And it changed in a split second. That helped me to see something about the impermanent nature of self and that sense of "that's me." This is actually one of the really great tools around exploring not-self—when we start to see these identities, just noticing what kinds of senses of self there are.

Another time I was sitting in the dining room, basically miserable, feeling the miserable self.

And then I picked up my fork and I noted "lifting, lifting," and suddenly I became a practicing yogi, and the miserable self disappeared. It was like—whoa, what happened?

So we can see these shifts of identities. And in seeing these shifts, we start to recognize and understand, especially for the ones that are kind of entrenched. The ones that are entrenched, we impute a permanence to. We think they're always there. And we can start to recognize through this kind of exploration—like when I turned into that two-year-old, the forty-year-old analytical one was not there. It just did not exist. We begin to poke holes in this belief of the solidity, or the ongoing traveling through time, of these identities.

The Buddha offered a number of ways to explore this. He actually identified twenty ways that we create identities. I'm not going to go through all twenty ways we create identities—you can breathe a sigh of relief. But I will just mention the frame and a couple of the things he said about it.

We get the twenty by taking the five aggregates times four methods of identifying with each one. Five times four is twenty.

These four methods of identifying: The Buddha says we tend to create an identity or a view of self as "I am something." I am my body, I am my feelings, I am my emotions. This is a very common way that we identify. "I'm angry, I'm miserable." We identify with roles—I'm the parent, the child, the teacher, the student. So we have this "I am something" going on sometimes. And we can reflect or hear the kinds of thoughts going on in our mind and begin to touch into the flavor of identity that's happening.

Another one is the possessive quality: something is mine. My emotions are mine. You might have more of a feeling of the emotions being mine rather than "I am my emotions"—maybe a slightly different flavor of identifying around the emotions. The body belongs to me. The body is mine. Some entity exists that owns

the body. That's another flavor of identification.

And then two other interesting ones: "I am inside of something." I'm inside the body. I'm inside of consciousness. Sometimes in a meditative state it can feel like that—I'm inside of consciousness. A sense of sitting here behind the eyes and looking out. The "I" is up here somewhere, looking out. That feeling of being inside. Or something is inside of me—another flavor of identification. Consciousness is in me, maybe. Emotions are in me.

So the Buddha points to these different ways of identifying. He was a real analyzer—he really pulled things apart and saw how they worked and were put together. I think it can be useful at times to recognize that we are identifying in different ways at different times.

Now, for myself personally, this twenty-part framework is not one that I use in my own practice very much. Occasionally I'll use it in a reflective way, recognizing, "Oh yes, taking myself to be inside of my body." Something like that. But there's another framework that the Buddha offered that I find really useful in my practice. That one I'm going to spend more time with, because I can talk about how it's informed my understanding and my practice.

There's a very common encouragement by the Buddha: when we notice something arising with the aggregates, with dukkha, with clinging—in so many different places—there's this encouragement that one should see with proper wisdom. Whatever is arising—the body, feeling, perception, clinging, craving—one should see with proper wisdom: "This is not mine, this I am not, this is not myself."

So he has this three-part exploration. And what I began to explore is not so much...

I mean, sometimes I use that. Sometimes I just remind myself. It's kind of like using that as a reflection. Sometimes I remind myself when I'm caught by something—caught by some mind state—this is not me, this is conditioned. *Conditioned.*

So that's another way of understanding or framing this statement: this is not who I am. And the understanding of the sense of self being a conditioned unfolding, a conditioned arising—sometimes we can just remind ourselves, yes, this is conditioned. I also like using, "This is nature." One of my teachers, Sayadaw U Tejaniya, offered this: "This is nature." What's happening right now is like a plant growing or a rainbow arising. It's just nature. And so that reflection can sometimes help bring a little more balance in the mind so that the mindfulness can have some more ease with it. So that's one way of using that reflection, which has been very helpful for me.

Another way of exploring it is to look at the three parts and see what sense of self is being turned over. The first one—"this is not mine"—is turning over the possessive self: *this is mine.* There are times when the primary sense of identification is around ownership, possession. My own papers at one point had so much suffering in one retreat where I had taken ownership of a word. I had thought in some way that I had coined a phrase, and I heard other people using that phrase. And they weren't giving me credit. So much

suffering.

So that's one way of having that sense of self—I own this, this is mine. That's probably the most obvious form of selfing. And I think it's interesting: as I reflected on these three, to me it's like each one points to a subtler sense of self. This possessive sense of self, we recognize this, we know this one. And so beginning to get familiar with it—in this way of asking, okay, what is this sense of self? What is this feeling of possession? What is that like? When I started exploring these senses of self, I found a lot of contraction in the body, a lot of familiar mind states. And what I began to realize is that what I called a sense of self was just a lot of familiar contractions and mind states.

The second one—after this possessor—is "this I am not." That's turning over the sense of "this is what I am." I am solid. I am this kind of being that travels through time. I am the one who chooses, who decides, who acts. This is self as agent in some ways—this sense "I am."

That exploration around that sense of self is something that we've pointed to in several talks. Looking at this aspect of how action happens, in the instructions on intention and in Sally's talk on intention and in Greg's talk on karma, we talked about this—this aspect of how choice arises, intention arises, dependent on conditions. We can start to see this.

I think I gave the example in the instructions around intention that something might happen: you have your breakfast and you've had your tea or coffee or water, whatever you've had to drink. And then sitting in the hall after breakfast, the bladder gets full. The pressure builds. There's discomfort. There's the intention to relieve that pressure, which leads to the intention to get up, stand, use the restroom. Sometimes we can see this with such clarity that it's a little bit spooky. Because it really shows us at times how these intentions are conditioned. And what I thought was me deciding to get up—I decided to get up and go to the restroom—was a whole series of conditions unfolding.

This can be a little odd to see sometimes, but we can be curious about this. When we think, "I am the one who's acting or choosing," begin to investigate that. What is that?

"Who is choosing?" That, as the Buddha would say, is not a valid question. With something as condition, intention arises. In this case, with feeling as condition, discomfort arose. With discomfort as condition, the intention to relieve discomfort arose.

So this is the second sense of self—the one who's in control, who decides, who chooses. I had an interesting experience one day seeing the subtlety of this feeling of being in control and the sense of self embedded within it.

I was taking a drive with my dear friend Annie one time while teaching this retreat. We went out for a nice drive on a beautiful day, and she was driving me along all these back roads I'd never been on. I was just the passenger, looking out the window, really happy. As I felt that happiness—and sometimes on these retreats even as teachers we gain some continuity of mindfulness—I had that happen in that moment.

There was a real continuity of seeing that sense of happiness arising, and what I saw in being present with it was that the happiness was predicated on this sense of "Ah, I've got it figured out." It wasn't as simple as just appreciating that in the scene is only the scene, in the heard is only the heard. There was a subtle sense of "Ah, I'm in control." That felt good.

I just had to laugh at myself. How subtle is that? I didn't beat myself up for having that experience. It's just—that is so subtle. That sense of control, and the happiness had seemed so simple.

This is a kind of exploration we can do.

And then the third one: "This is not myself." This one took me a little more reflecting on what it might mean. I don't know if this is exactly what it's pointing to, but it was useful as I explored it in this way.

So there's the sense of "mine," there's a sense of "I am," and then there's a sense of "me." Initially I didn't quite feel into what the difference between "I am" and "me" might be. But as I kept exploring my experience, noticing the senses of self and what was going on around them, there was one point where I could clearly see the sense of self as the one who does things—seeing these intentions arise and the actions follow, thinking "Who's in charge here anyway?" It's really quite odd.

I also noticed something about the knowings—you know, the choosing or knowing what I'm aware of. At one point it became so clear to me that I was not in charge of this knowing process. It was just happening. I didn't even really get to pick what was coming into that awareness. This was just happening, just unfolding. And yet there was a clear sense in that moment: I wasn't in control, but it sure felt like it was happening to me.

That pointed me to a subtler sense of self. We could say the first one is the self as agent or as subject—self as the subject of the sentence. "I am the one who does this"—the agent of the action. And the "me" is self as the recipient, the object. "I'm the hapless one that things happen to." That's also a sense of self.

I found it really useful to notice these three different flavors of senses of self. Sometimes a sense of self feels really clear; there are times when it's not so obvious. And when it's not obvious, that's not the time to go looking for it.

Sometimes we might be experiencing suffering around an emotion, and we might see there's a feeling of anger or frustration. We might think, "Well, where's the sense of self here?" There's clearly perhaps the sense of "I am angry" or "I am frustrated," but that feeling of the "I am" is overwhelmed by the anger itself—by the feeling, the experience of that anger. Sometimes what we're able to notice is not so much the subtlety of the "I" that feels angry, but just the anger itself. We don't have to try to find the "I" in the middle, or the "I" that's connected to dukkha.

Just looking at dukkha is good enough.

In fact, there's a teaching where the Buddha described how dukkha comes to be—a teaching of dependent

origination, these links of just the process by which suffering arises. And we've talked about pieces of it. Contact leads to feeling, which leads to craving. When ignorance is present in the mind, feeling leads to craving, craving leads to clinging, clinging leads to becoming. Becoming leads to birth, and birth leads to suffering.

And so the work of the First Noble Truth—to understand suffering—really points to understanding this process of dependent origination, how suffering comes to be. That same process also describes how the sense of self comes to be. Becoming is this arising of the sense of self. Birth is taking identification—one way to understand birth is taking birth into an identity. This same process describes both how the sense of self comes to be and how suffering comes to be.

So whatever is obvious to you in the moment, if it's suffering that's obvious, you are exploring this process. You don't have to go searching after hearing this talk. It's not necessary to think, "Okay, where's the sense of self in there?" And yet sometimes that is what's staring us in the face.

Kind of like when I was doing the walking meditation and feeling that sense of "I'm right." Self-righteousness is a good place to feel the sense of self—that's a great one. So if you feel self-righteous, take that as an opportunity to explore. What is this feeling? What is it? And as I saw in that example, how it just shifted on a dime and became something else.

The sense I had in that first experience of really feeling into that sense of self was how solid it felt, how real it felt, how stable it felt. And then when it vanished in a second, it was like, "Wow, that was not stable." No. Thank goodness that was not stable.

Another way we can see selfing—I talked about noticing the thoughts in our mind. So many of our thoughts relate to me. I'd say probably the vast majority of our thoughts have me at the center. We can tell this because our thoughts come with "I," "me," "mine" in them. And yet sometimes our thoughts come with "they," "them," "that person." "They shouldn't be doing that." This is an othering. We are creating a self out of them, making them something separate. And in that process by which we other, there is a sense of self here.

Sometimes it may be more clear to us that we are othering, so we can be curious about that as a form of selfing. What does it feel like when there's this sense of imputing otherness? So much suffering comes from this type of selfing.

When we create other, we create an identity here. Sometimes these self and others have to do with specific individuals, specific somebody that we have opinions or views about. And sometimes these otherings come from more cultural perspectives, tribal identities that we might have, group identities that we don't necessarily recognize. The othering that happens around race and sexual orientation and religious affiliation—this is a huge place of suffering, and it comes about through this mental formation of selfing and othering.

We can begin to be curious about that kind of selfing, that othering. We may not be able to feel into the self that's here, but maybe we can feel into the sense of separation. When we create a sense of self, when there is a sense of self arising and being believed, there is a separation. It may be us from some other part of ourselves. It may be us from some other person. It may be us and some thing that we own—we are creating a separation there, thinking that we can own something.

The sense of self comes with a separation.

And we can feel into that sometimes, we can feel into that experience of separation.

Seeing the selfing, seeing the senses of self arise, we see how intimately connected with dukkha it can be. These senses of self—we often have identities around strategies that we've used to navigate difficulty. Strategies for safety in our lives. Strategies for happiness. This is often where these senses of self congeal.

And so these senses of self have mistakenly been trying to help us get through life, get through the impermanent, unreliable, uncontrollable nature of the way things are. Very much like when I talked about the tangle—the tangle of suffering—the sense of self is also a tangle. It's a different version of that tangle. Or maybe it's the same version, just seen from a different perspective.

And it's really important to meet that with allowing and love, to let the wisdom begin to untangle the threads of that sense of self. Rather than trying to not-self the self, meet it with mindfulness.

It also has these pointers back to love and to wisdom—this wish to be happy, healthy, safe, and trying to navigate these impermanent, unreliable situations, and the tangle that happens there. So sometimes that tangle is felt as an identity. Sometimes it's felt as suffering. Sometimes we feel it as both.

And honoring these with our respect. The word *respect* means to look at again—that's the derivation of that word, to look closely at. So respecting these tangles, holding them with respect and honoring them. Not to dismiss our identities, but to hold them with care. Let them reveal and release with wisdom.

Let's just sit for a few moments.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.