Not Self and Selfing (Retreat at Spirit Rock)

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 1:02:10

In the Buddha's teachings, the texts we have inherited down through the generations, there are many stories of the Buddha speaking to people about how suffering happens, how we get caught, how we struggle.

I'm going to start with one of those teachings. Here he begins with how an ordinary person meets the world. How does an ordinary person navigate life? He says, "An ordinary person 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: "Am I? Am I not? What am I? How am I? Where did this being come from? Where will it go?"

And so he points to the way that we orient to experience as an ordinary person without training, without hearing the teachings. We orient to the world through the perspective of self. Any of these sound familiar?

With that perspective, he says, we get caught in views of self. These views of self include "self exists in me" or "I am a self." Also included is "no self exists in me." So both attachment or belief in the view of self and the belief in no self—"there is no self"—the Buddha said that is wrong view. That is a view of self, to believe there is no self.

Another view he describes: "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, and will endure as long as eternity."

He calls these views of self, pointing to the sense of self being a view—an idea, a belief. And he says, "This is called the thicket of views, the wilderness of views, the contortion of views, the vacillation of views, the fetter of views. Fettered by the fetter of views, the ordinary person is not freed from suffering."

So he points to looking at experience through this perspective of self as being a key reason why suffering happens.

In another teaching, again pointing to how easy it is for us to get caught by this view, there's a questioner talking to the Buddha. The Buddha is explaining about experience to this questioner, whose name is

Pāguna. At a certain point in this conversation, the Buddha is talking about the experience of feeling—of pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral. The questioner says, "Venerable sir, who feels?"

The Buddha responds, "Not a valid question. I do not say one feels. If I said 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 comes to be."

This questioner doesn't quite get it, because his next question is, "Venerable sir, who craves?"

And so again, pointing to how easy it is for us to get caught in this belief—that there is one who feels, one who knows, one who craves, one who gets angry, one who gets confused. Instead, the Buddha points to this being as a process. This being is a process.

This teaching also points to how, when we have not understood the teaching of not-self, we misapprehend our experience. I appreciate the way Thanissaro Bhikkhu translates the term *anattā*. Often rendered as "no-self" or "not-self," I prefer "not-self" because the Buddha clearly stated that "there is no self" is wrong view—it is simply another view of self. To me, "not-self" evokes the understanding that what we think of as self is not what we think it is. It's not what we think it is. So it's not self.

What we often take to be self is this conditioned process. We attribute an enduring quality, a lasting nature, a sense of stability to something that is seeing, feeling, hearing, knowing, craving, being mindful. We attribute something to this process. We misunderstand this conditioned process as a stable, enduring reality.

This is one way we can begin to enter into this teaching of not-self—to understand what is meant by it. It's not that the Buddha is saying there's nothing there. He clearly points to this process nature of experience. There's this process unfolding, and conditions, lawful conditions, shaping that process. But there's nothing stable or enduring there. Nothing that we can pin down and say, "This, this is me. This is who I am."

When we try to do that, when we actually try to look—and we'll explore this a little more later in the talk—looking at what we actually think of as self, what is the experience we call "me"? What is the experience we say "I am"? What is that? When we start to look at it, we see it's really hard to actually point to. And it's hard to point to because there's nothing to point to. The process nature of experience doesn't lend itself to landing on something and saying, "Oh, that—that's what the self is."

I'd like to use an analogy to help us enter into understanding this process nature, this conditioned nature, the flux of experience that we sometimes mistake or misunderstand as a self.

If we think about a rainbow: I had the great fortune in January and early February to be on self-retreat. A friend let me use their cabin on the coast of Oregon, and the weather there is pretty wild in January. There were some days when the waves were enormous. I would take walks along the cliff there—the place I was

staying was right on the ocean—and every day I would walk along the cliff. One day the waves were so high. The cliff I was on was about fifty to seventy feet above sea level, but the waves were so enormous they were crashing against the cliffs and shooting up into the air.

It happened to be a sunny day, and as I was walking along, in one place on that cliff I was looking out at the burst of the crash of the waves, and a rainbow appeared right in front of me. And then it vanished, of course. And then another wave came and it appeared again. There was a mist floating by, and the rainbow kind of appeared and disappeared as that mist floated past.

It looked very stable when it was there, and in fact it looked like it was being revealed—almost as if it was hanging in the air, just waiting to be revealed, like a curtain being drawn back. And yet, there isn't a rainbow hanging in the air there. If I had walked ten feet in one direction, I couldn't see the rainbow, because the orientation of the sun and the water wasn't right. That's a condition for the rainbow to appear.

Now, is the rainbow there if I'm not looking at it? I don't know. Same question as: is there sound if a tree falls in the forest and nobody's listening? In terms of my experience, the rainbow did not exist when I walked ten yards down the cliff. When the waves fell, there was no rainbow. If the sun had gone behind a cloud, there would be no rainbow. These conditions came together to produce this experience of rainbow—a conditioned process.

And yet, it's not that the rainbow doesn't exist. We can't say there's no rainbow. I mean, we can take a picture of a rainbow.

We can't say it's a thing either. It's dependent on conditions. So the sense of self is very like that. It comes into being in dependence on conditions. The sense of self comes into being in dependence on conditions.

The Buddha taught quite a bit about this understanding around anattā, not-self. The very second discourse the Buddha is said to have given is a teaching to the five friends. Susie talked about the five friends that he practiced with before he found his own way. After he understood his freedom and realized he could articulate it to people who had some depth of understanding, some depth of practice, he thought of his five friends. He went to find them and to give them some of his understanding.

The first teaching was the teaching on the Eightfold Path and the Four Noble Truths. The second one was said to be a teaching on not-self. In this text, he launches right in, framing an understanding of not-self around a way of understanding human experience through a teaching called the five aggregates.

We haven't explicitly done a five aggregate talk in this half of the retreat, so I'll just briefly overview it here. We've talked about various parts of this teaching. The five aggregates is a way of understanding human experience, much as the way the six sense bases are a way of understanding human experience that John talked about the other night. This is a way to divide up our human experience. We can understand our human experience as coming in through these six sense bases. Another way of dividing

up human experience is to think about it in terms of these five processes.

The five processes are: a process of physical form, a process of physicality, and then four mental processes at work. The process of feeling, which Amana talked so beautifully about. The process of perception, which I spoke about. The process of mental formations, which is basically all of the stuff that goes on in our minds—thoughts and emotions and moods and mind states. All of those are mental formations. Sometimes this aggregate is called intentional or volitional formations, and so it is those mental activities that have intention associated with them. Somebody did talk about intention, and Susie brought it in last night in talking about karma. So we have touched on these. The fourth mental process is the process of knowing, of the simple recognition of experience.

So we have physical experience and mental experience, physical and mental experience interplaying, interweaving. Form, feeling, perceptions, intentional or volitional formations, and consciousness.

Many of the teachings the Buddha offered around not-self use this framework to help us basically understand that we've misperceived or misunderstood a sense of self. We've misattributed, created a view where there's nothing really to hang that view on.

In this teaching, the Buddha points to each of these five aggregates from different perspectives. The first perspective he points to is the perspective essentially of control. He says, can you control form? Do you have mastery over form? Can you say, "May my body be thus, may my body not be thus"? This is the language of the sutta. It goes through all of the five aggregates in this way:

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

This points to one way that we tend to think of a sense of self—that a sense of self is something that has mastery or control over some parts of our experience. Here the Buddha is pointing out that the experience of body in effect can't be what we would call self because we cannot control it. We cannot ultimately control it. We cannot fully control it.

I'm going to read another one of these because it lends a different flavor to the teaching:

"Consciousness is not self. If consciousness were self, consciousness would not lend itself to affliction. And it would be possible to determine of consciousness, 'Let my consciousness be thus, let my consciousness not be thus.'"

But because consciousness is not self, consciousness leads to affliction. And it is not possible to say, "Let my consciousness be thus, let my consciousness not be thus."

The Buddha is actually pointing to what we know. We know we can't say, "Let my consciousness be thus." Wouldn't it be so wonderful if we could? That would be so great—we could just sit down and say, "May

mindfulness arise and be steadily arising." But we don't have that kind of control. And he points to this very evident thing.

One way to look at this teaching is through the experience of the wandering mind. We know the mind wanders. We sit down, we try to pay attention to our breath, we try to stabilize our attention in the present moment, and what happens? The mind wanders. Who did that? You didn't decide, "I'm going to make my mind wander now." Mostly. Sometimes we do try to do that—"I'm going to let go of being mindful right now." But much of the time when the mind wanders, it simply wanders. Conditions arise such that the mind loses mindfulness. And then mindfulness returns. Who did that? You didn't do that. It just happened—that effortless mindfulness returning that we talked about early in March. It's just arising. No one in control of it arising. Just a process unfolding. And the Buddha points to this as evidence for not-self.

These are experiences we have all the time. It's interesting—we think there's a lot of evidence for self. But when we try to start looking at what the evidence for self actually is, it ends up being pretty vague and not easy to pin down. And we don't think that there's much evidence for not-self, but it's staring us in the face all the time. This lack of control is one of those pieces of evidence.

There is more evidence for not-self that the Buddha points to. This teaching, to some extent, refers to a definition of self that was common in his day. At that time, the aim of spiritual practice in certain circles was to merge with Atman—merge with the great Self. Atman, Atta, coming from the same root. And that Atman was thought to be permanent and blissful, unchangeable.

So the Buddha points to what we experience, direct experience, and says: look in your experience. Is any part of your experience permanent? Anything you experience? Anything you can say is lasting? And if you look at it—form, feeling, mental formations, perception, consciousness—all changing. None of it stable.

This becomes more and more clear the more continuous our mindfulness gets. This is one of those understandings that begins to point itself out to us. Yes, things are not permanent. Experience. There's nothing that can be found in experience that is permanent.

And because it's impermanent, the Buddha points out, because it's impermanent, there is the trying to find something on which to land, for there to be some place of reliable happiness. Nothing in our experience qualifies as a place where we could say, "Yes, that's where I can find reliable, unchangeable happiness." Because everything is impermanent. And so by corollary, it's also unreliable. Impermanent, unreliable experience.

This the Buddha points to as not worthy. He asks: is this worthy of being called self? And so this teaching also points a little bit to what do we call self?

How do we define a sense of self? And does it make sense to call it a self? Does it make sense in the way that we are interpreting it as self? This is a kind of looking at what is it, how do we feel into what a sense

of self is. And how does our practice—how does the practice of mindfulness joined with wise intention, wise view—how does this practice help us to not just take this in as a concept? Sometimes even the concept is hard enough to take in. But how does it begin to let us actually understand this non-conceptually, through direct experience? How can this practice help us to understand the teaching of not-self?

One of the most direct doorways to this is through the exploration of what feels like a sense of self. What am I calling self? Study what you're calling self. There's a famous quote by the Zen master Dogen: "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." This points to the exploration of what we are calling a sense of self. When a sense of self arises, what is that actually? What is that experience? Through that exploration, we begin to understand that what we are calling a sense of self is simply a process—that there isn't anything stable in there, isn't anything that we can call what we think of as a sense of self. So we're getting familiar with what we think of as self, experientially.

In brief, as we do that, as we explore a sense of self, there might be times—and some of you have described noticing this—when you're noticing some sense of self and it falls apart. You recognize, "Wow, that was not who I am. That was just an arising. It wasn't who I am." Sometimes as we explore in our experience the senses of self, we see one disintegrating, and we recognize, "Wow, nope. If that were me, it would still be here." This is one of the senses of self—a kind of sense of something that's stable and enduring. Looking at experience, anything we think is stable and enduring, we look at it long enough and we see it changes.

There are times too, as we're exploring our experience, when we see a sense of self arising, and again we see, "Wow, that came into being." There was a witnessing of seeing this experience coming into being, through causes and conditions. And we see, "Wow, that was a conditioned process that arose."

The Buddha was famous for his lists, as you know. He had a teaching of the twenty ways that we have identity view. Basically, for each of the five aggregates, there are four ways of attributing a sense of self—so that's five times four, twenty. I'm not going to try to go through these exhaustively, but I want to give you a flavor of these different ways the Buddha pointed to that we misattribute or create a view. He calls this identity view, *sakkāya diṭṭhi* in the Pali. Identity view, personality view. And it's seen as a view. The sense of self is understood to be basically a belief that is misunderstood as a thing.

This connects to that teaching I offered around perception and *papañca*—that with a concept, with perceiving or recognizing something, a concept comes into play, and then we believe that concept to have some kind of inherent existence. We do this with a sense of self. This is a process that happens in our minds, and it seems to be pretty human. It's a pretty deep process, potentially pretty useful.

The Buddha points to this view as having different flavors. One of the flavors is "I am something." I am body. I am the body. I am my emotions. I am angry, I am miserable, I am happy.

Or we may have an identity around roles—concepts, essentially. I'm a mother, I'm a parent, I'm a sibling, I'm a student. Basically an identification around a concept. Or we may have an identification around being the one that things happen to: I'm the one who feels, I'm the one who knows.

This is the first kind of view, and we can hear it almost in our minds at times. "I am so angry"—identity view in that form, attributing, equating our self with the feeling.

The second form of identity view is possessiveness. Something is mine. Things belong to me. I have a body. I have feelings. I have emotions. As opposed to being those things, it's like there's something bigger that has them. It's another way. And again, we use this language: "I have emotions. I have anger."

The third kind of identity view, the Buddha says, is "I am inside of something." This one is less familiar to me. The main way I feel this one is at times feeling like I'm inside the body—that somehow there's a me sitting somewhere behind my eyes or something. Potentially at times in certain states of meditation, there's been a sense of an expansive state and feeling like I'm in the state. Being inside of awareness. Something like that.

And the fourth way of holding, of creating this view of self, is that something is inside of me. Emotions are in me. This again, in language we might say—we might feel like we're holding in emotions. The emotions are inside. Holding it in. Consciousness is in me.

So those are ways the Buddha pointed to, and I think we can reflect on the language, or when our thoughts start doing their process, they often reveal how we are identifying. "I am so angry." "These feelings—I have to hold them in." Pointing to where it is, how it is that we're attributing a sense of self in each of those ways.

I have not experienced all twenty of those ways, and yet I find these useful reflections at times to again use those thoughts as pointers to how I might be holding a sense of self. The language in the mind can often point to when we do have a sense of self. The words "me," "I," "mine"—those are good clues that there's a sense of self going on.

The Buddha did use those words familiarly, colloquially. It's like, we don't have to say—if I'm going to walk across the room, I can say, "Oh, I'm going to go out the door." I don't have to say, "This process of mind and body is going to stand and intend to walk across the door." We can say, "I'm going to walk out the door." But often when our thoughts come up, it's a pointer. And when we see our thoughts—I don't know, some really large number of them are self-referential. At least ninety-nine percent seem to have something to do with me. Or they have something to do with me indirectly because they have something to do with others.

This, in my experience, is another way that we have a sense of self. It's a kind of indirect way, but if we are orienting toward "that person there, doing that thing"—them, they, their—there is a sense of self happening in being separated from. The "they-them-there" is creating an other, something external, and

there will be a sense of self. It may not be as obvious. What we may be seeing or recognizing in those thoughts is the words "they," "them." "They shouldn't do that." "They're thinking this thing about me." All of those different thoughts about other. So that's another way that we have a sense of self.

So we can notice those kinds of thoughts as well.

There's a sense, I think, often with the sense of self, that there's a kind of solidity somehow. A sense of stability. Something continuous that has traveled through life. This is reinforced by memories, by conversations with family about what we did when we were kids. So there's this imputing of a stability of a being that has traveled through time. It's another way that we feel the sense of self. This is just more, in my experience, ways that I've seen it.

And then a big way that I find in my own experience around selfing is around being the one who chooses. I'm the one who decides things. That's a main kind of congealing of self.

This particular exploration—as we start to look at the sense of self here, when mindfulness gets stronger, when mindfulness gets more continuous—we start to see how decisions come to be. We can watch this process. You're sitting in the hall and feel a slight pressure in the bladder. Pressure gets stronger, stronger, stronger. Unpleasantness arises. There's the recognition of needing to relieve the bladder. With that, there's an intention to do that. Followed by a whole host of intentions to stand, get up, walk out the door, go to the restroom. We can see this unfolding and recognize it's almost like it's just a machine at work. It feels a little spooky sometimes. Like, who made that decision? It was just a process unfolding. And so the witnessing of how choice happens—we can begin to really, that can begin to undermine this identification around being the one who chooses, who decides.

At some point I really began to see this particularly around consciousness. I could see I'm not the one who decides what comes into consciousness. I thought I was. I thought I chose what to pay attention to. But then I began to see, no, some process does that. So I could see, wow, I'm not the one doing that. But it sure feels like it's happening to me—another form of selfing. I'm the one things happen to. So again, just watching this, seeing what is this sense of self arising, watching the processes around it.

As we watch these processes at work, we can see a lot of really interesting things. One of the things that I found so fascinating was that there's not a single thing that I call self. There's a lot of selves. A lot of different senses of selves. Many of these senses of selves have nothing to do with each other. Thinking a particular thought about a dear friend—the friend arises, the feelings associated with that friendship arise. It feels like me. A few minutes later, the thought of a parent, my parent, arises and a whole different set of feelings and experiences comes to be there, having nothing to do with this other one.

At some point I thought, wow, a sense of self is just simply a familiar set of contractions and thoughts and moods. That's what a sense of self feels like. Just familiar stuff happening. It has happened before, and I'm calling it a sense of self.

A lot of these identities—another word for selves, identities—a lot of these identities are conditioned. They are all conditioned, in fact, not a lot of them. They are all conditioned by experience, and so my friend-self, for instance, that's conditioned by that particular individual experience. They're also conditioned by culture. And so my experience of being a cisgendered female—a female that feels like a female in her own body and feels like a female—that experience is conditioned. Any identity around that female experience is conditioned a lot by culture. And I butted up against a lot of that—what I was told by culture that females could and couldn't do, were and weren't good at.

A lot of suffering there. A lot of fighting. "No, that's not me."

So these identities come into being not only in dependence on our own personal experience, but also in dependence on culture. And a lot of these senses of self are strategies for navigating our lives—strategies for navigating, in particular, the challenges of an impermanent, unreliable, uncontrollable world. Strategies for safety.

When you reflect on familiar patterns and habits, ones that come up a lot—and I've heard this frequently in our meetings—when something keeps arising on retreat, I often ask, "Is this something you experience in your life?" And often it is, because these patterns repeat themselves. They are conditioned, and they're strategies for navigating the world. When we butt up against challenge in the retreat, we carry our habitual strategies from life to try to deal with them, and so we get to see our senses of self coming into how we engage in the practice. This isn't a mistake. It's actually helpful. It's not like we bring a different set of conditions in here than we have out there. We really get to see our conditioning in here.

Sometimes the sense of self is vague, hard to really point to and identify. Sometimes it's really, really clear. That may be the best time to begin looking at what it is I'm calling self. Certain kinds of experiences, certain kinds of habitual patterns, tend to evoke a strong identity. Self-righteousness is one of them—"I'm right. I'm right." There can be strong identities around certain emotions, strong identities around particular habitual patterns. Many of these are the ones we suffer over.

And this points to something I mentioned the other day: the teaching of dependent origination, which describes how suffering comes to be, also describes how these senses of self come to be. It's the same process. So when there is this churning of identity, there's also this clinging to something, holding on to something. Sometimes when the sense of self feels really clear, it's a good time to look at it.

I'm going to tell a story from my own practice around this—a particularly strong identity I had around being unworthy. Self-hatred was one of its main manifestations.

Actually, it took a while before I really saw it. I did not grow up feeling like I hated myself. I grew up feeling very competent, very in control and in charge, knowing what I wanted to do. When I started meditating, I began hearing and recognizing these voices in my head: "You're a failure. You're no good. You don't do that right. You're a terrible yogi." And there were also ones like, "You're the best yogi in the

room. You're really good at this." Ryan talked the other night about these contrasting identities that we have, and I saw that in spades. I began to recognize that so much of my patterns of striving to succeed had been rooted in that sense of being a failure.

When I began to see that, it was really hard to feel it. Self-hatred is a very painful feeling. It feels like you're being annihilated. So it was a long process to explore this, to watch it, to have the courage to open to it as an arising, to know when I couldn't know it as an arising—when my mindfulness wasn't strong enough to really meet it and I was going to get sucked into it. There was a lot of work around this, a lot of practice.

During one particular three-month course, I look back on it and it was like my self-hatred retreat. I really got to see this pattern over and over and over again. I would have a few days in the middle where it wasn't there so much. And this points to one of the really useful tools around a pervasive sense of self: notice when it's not there.

This was something I did notice. There were days when self-hatred was not here. That begins to poke holes in the belief in the identity, in the solidification around this. "I am unworthy."

I am a failure. It pokes holes in that solidity, because we see it's not always there. This is a really powerful tool for working with those pervasive identities.

Sometimes I could be with the pattern as it arose, and sometimes I would get pulled under. I just kept practicing, kept practicing with it.

One evening, after a dharma talk, Joseph had given a teaching in the hall around pervasive patterns. He offered something which I will share with you because it was very helpful for me that evening. He said that if there's something that keeps coming up over and over again, it's really helpful to recognize when it arises, the very moment it arises. Know that as contact. The arising of that is contact. And then notice the feeling tone of that arising.

As I left the hall that evening—I was going out through the upper walking room at IMS, walking up the stairs—and the feeling of self-hatred just descended. There was this recognition: oh. And a feeling of heaviness. Then I caught this and thought, I'm just going to practice with this.

I went back to my room and used that teaching he had offered. As I was sitting there, I was noticing this fluctuation around the sense of self-hatred. It would not be there, and then it would come into being. I would say, "Contact. Unpleasant." I would note it. Just contact, unpleasant. Then it might weaken, then get stronger. Contact, unpleasant. I kept just doing that for a long time that evening.

I had a lot of real dedication to being with it. I wasn't afraid of it. That was itself a lot of work, you know—a lot of working through the fear of the feeling, a lot of dealing with some of the history of how it came to be. A lot of work preceded this evening. It was probably a couple of years of working with this

pattern.

But this particular evening I just had a lot of confidence in the path and in the power of mindfulness. At some point, in seeing that contact, the mind understood: this is just a thought. "You're no good"—it is simply a thought. The sense of self was picking that thought up and doing a believing process with it. "Oh, I'm no good. Oh yeah, I believe that. Oh yeah, I believe that. Oh yeah. Oh, I really believe that." I could see it in that moment of its arising. It's just a thought.

And in that moment, the whole thing just fell apart.

I had a moment where I thought, "Oh, never again will I experience that self-hatred." And in the next moment there was wisdom. I thought, "No, these are the conditions right now. There are the conditions right now to see this." Then there was a kind of shift—what was so interesting in that moment was that there was a movement from self-hatred to bliss in just a split second. And then in seeing that—oh no, this is just the conditions now—that bliss shifted to just equanimity. In a moment, in a moment, in a moment.

That moment was extremely powerful. The pattern, I would say, still exists. But what seems to be gone is the belief in the thoughts. The thoughts come, but there's not the belief. So it's like, "Oh yeah, there's that thought. You're a failure. Yeah, there's that thought."

Very occasionally I find, in particular it seems to be in deeper states of meditation, sometimes the mind picks it up a little bit. Oh, there it is again. So I have a lot of respect for this pattern. It's like a big tree got uprooted that night, but the filaments are still there. So I really respect that pattern. See those thoughts. See them.

We can study our senses of self. We can get curious about them. This is very powerful understanding. What I described was a powerful insight into an identity that not only shifted that identity—it changed my life in that moment. It's one of perhaps a dozen or so moments of really clear insight in my practice that I can say, yes, that split second changed my life. A few of those in my practice. That moment really shifted my life. But it also gave me a deeper level of understanding about how the sense of self works. It was an understanding into that teaching of not-self.

I find it really important in exploring senses of self—much as we've been saying around suffering, opening to the entirety of our human experience, honoring experience, respecting our experience, respecting the suffering that arises, opening to it, witnessing it, being with it, holding it with allowing and love—the same thing goes with honoring our identities, honoring our senses of self.

They have their function, and often they have a very strong one. Sometimes we can just bow to those identities. Yeah, thank you for doing this, like keeping me alive until this point. Because some of our habits and patterns were strategies for how to get through our upbringing. And so it's like, yes, I see you and thank you for getting me here—and let's see, can we relate to things in a different way?

Honoring our identities, being aware of them, opening to them, is a form of honoring. It's a form of respect. That very word, *respect*, means to look again and again, to look again at what's there.

The honoring of these identities begins to help us understand. The other day I spoke to those threads that come into both suffering and into identities—the threads of the deep wish to be happy, healthy, safe, at ease, and those threads of truth: impermanent, unreliable, uncontrollable. Not only is our suffering a kind of knotting up of those threads, but so can our identities be. And so the mindfulness and the wisdom begin to help us understand. Seeing our identities points back to love, compassion, and truth. When we see through the tangle, the tangle of views, there's love and wisdom to be seen, to be experienced.

Let's sit for a moment.

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