Investigating Anattā: Clinging

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:00:25

So I'm happy to be here. In case some of you don't know me, my name is Carol Wilson. I'm happy to see you all here.

Tonight, I want to talk about investigating anattā. And it looks like it's going to end up being a two-part talk, or else it would be really, really long. So I'll make it two parts.

To the best of my understanding, whatever the Buddha taught, he wasn't teaching in order to have people acquire another philosophical concept. He wasn't teaching a body of knowledge that he wanted people to learn. But as he said over and over, he's just teaching what we need to know to free our hearts and minds from suffering. And that's true also in his teaching about anattā, the sense of no-self.

I say that because so often this particular characteristic of existence—the three characteristics together: anicca, impermanence; dukkha, suffering or unsatisfactoriness; and anattā, no-self—which are just the way that all conditioned phenomenal existence is, just how it is—of those three, often anattā is the one that makes people crazy. I don't mean literally crazy. We're already crazy. If we understood enough, then we'd be more sane. But thinking about it, trying to figure it out, trying to understand it in a philosophical way—that's how we tend to approach things—that makes us crazy. And that's not how I want to talk about it tonight. I'd like to investigate anattā, or more the feeling of the sense of self, in a very concrete way, using our practice.

The other thing people often tend to do in terms of anattā, if they're not just trying to think their way through it and getting crazy, is to wait. So many people say this in different ways: they're waiting in their practice, or measuring their idea of whether their practice has any benefit, by waiting for some big anattā flash, after which everything's changed, no more sense of self, life is copacetic and there are no more problems. I don't know if that relates to anybody here.

And the other way people relate to this is: "That could never happen to me. That's somewhere else down the road." All of this is really holding the idea of anattā as some state other than here, something to be achieved that isn't already true. And that's just not the case.

As with so much of what the Buddha's teachings reveal, it's simply a matter of recognizing our experience more accurately, and then responding to that more accurate recognition in the obvious way that makes sense. We stop suffering so much.

So rather than waiting around—follow the breath, in, out, in, out, notice the sensations, okay, okay, but when's it going to happen?—rather than practicing like that, it's more like recognizing when sense of self

is present, recognizing when it's absent.

Just personally, what I've experienced in my own life is not that there was some big moment after which I got anattā and before which I didn't. It's more the image that Suzuki Roshi gives: if you go out in a rainstorm and you get totally drenched, you know it. It's not like that. It's more like walking in a fog. You're walking in a fog and you don't realize you're getting wet. But when you come inside, you're completely soaked to the bone. Yet you couldn't point to the moment where that happened. That's another way of looking at it.

So what keeps us from recognizing just the way things are, just the facts? Ramana Maharshi once wrote that the idea of self is like a ghost which is caused by the play of shadows. If you look closely, the ghost vanishes. The ghost was never there. So also with the sense of self. So long as one does not look closely at it, it continues to give trouble. But when one looks for it, it is found not to exist.

With our practice, with our mindfulness, with the wisdom—sati-paññā, just mindfulness and wisdom at the point of contact, just noticing what's arising free of conception—we have the tools in any given moment to look more accurately, to recognize more accurately, to really get interested in what am I calling "me" in any particular moment, if there is a sense of me or mine, or if there's not.

There's one sutta where someone asked the Buddha, "What is it that liberated ones know? How would you sum it up?" There are lots of different ways to answer this. But in this particular sutta, he says that having heard that nothing is worth clinging to, the liberated one directly knows everything. Having heard that nothing is worth clinging to, he fully understands everything.

And Bhikkhu Bodhi in his commentary on this says: "He does not cling to any formation by way of craving and views. He does not become agitated because of craving, and thus personally realizes nibbāna through the extinguishing of all kilesas, of all torments of mind, of all defilements."

Does not cling by way of craving and views.

Realizes that nothing is worth clinging to. So yes, we're back to the familiar pith teaching, the core of pretty much everything. If you had to boil the Buddha's teaching down into one little line, that would be it: nothing is worth clinging to.

But rather than going into "oh no, not again, I know I can't give up clinging," what we can do, what I'm proposing tonight, is to explore in our own experience the nature of clinging—and in particular, the clinging that manifests in any particular moment as a sense of me or mine.

Non-clinging, really. Supreme truth, liberation through non-clinging. That's truly at the heart of whatever form of practice we're doing. Whether it's concentration or samatha practice, it's non-clinging. All the brahma viharas, wisdom practice, mindfulness practice—non-clinging is essential. Nothing works when we're clinging. All the practices open up by themselves when the heart and mind is not agitated through

clinging.

I'm sure by now everybody knows from your own experience various ways that clinging is suffering. It's pretty clear in some ways. We can kind of get it that holding on to particular objects or particular experiences that are going to change causes suffering. It doesn't mean we don't still do it, but we do have the basic understanding—that's not really rocket science—although we still do it, and that's the interesting thing.

But on a more subtle level, the clinging that perhaps is more difficult to see through—and in many cases, in my experience, is so familiar that it's difficult to recognize—is the clinging to aspects of experience that create the sense of self. Basically, clinging to form, to mind and form, nama-rupa, to the body, to ideas, to perceptions, to thoughts, to emotions, to formations, to views, ideas about ourselves. A lot of these things we don't even recognize are arising, never mind recognize that we're clinging to them—the basic habits of mind that are based in inaccurate understanding, inaccurate recognition of our mind and body.

Tonight I want to give more of an overview and point to some different ways we can explore when we're clinging in that way.

So the first thing really is just to get interested—not afraid of, not aversive to, but interested whenever we notice the feeling of me and mine, of I. Just to meet it as another arising experience, literally the same as you'd notice a sound or any other thought. We need to recognize when it's here.

But also recognize—and this is something that Ajahn Buddhadasa, the famous Thai forest monk who died perhaps fifteen years ago, talks about—the nature of mind when it's not agitated by clinging, when it's not distracted by being caught up in reactions to any particular experience. That emptiness of self, translated as "voidness" in English by his translator (I don't like that so much), but the nature of our heart and mind is naturally empty of self, naturally pure, naturally clear, naturally peaceful.

This isn't some state that we're striving to achieve, where we finally have dug up and annihilated all sense of self and can finally rest at ease. Buddhadasa points out over and over that along with recognizing when we're caught up—when there's this sense of need, this sense of struggle or agitation or conflict—it's equally, maybe more valuable and important, to recognize the nature of heart and mind when this is not present.

That emptiness of self, this kind of natural awareness, peaceful quality, open luminous quality, freedom from self is, in his words, truly normal and natural. Not a state we create when we get to some high level. It's truly a normal and natural way that we are. It's really how things are.

When we can recognize this—recognize when we feel like me-ing and my-ing, and recognize when that's not there—Buddhadasa talks about generating a contentment with voidness, generating a contentment with no sense of self, no sense of me or mine. As I go on, hopefully some of what I say will help point to why it may not be that easy or natural to really have contentment with voidness. As much as we resist our

sense of self, we're back to clinging. We really, in some ways, like it, cling to it.

A simple example of how we can see that the sense of me being there or not is just a trick of perception—it's not about changing the circumstances: When I was walking home this morning, the wind was blowing and it was really cold. I don't like the cold. My body doesn't like the cold. So I was walking, the wind was blowing, and I felt my body contracting and shivering. Then the thought came in: "It's too cold. I don't like it. I've got to walk fast." Subtle resistance, sense of me walking fast, needing to get home to where it was warm.

Now, this isn't some huge dramatic suffering, just very mild, everyday experience. But definitely a sense of me clinging to wanting it to be different, clinging to the sense of hurrying home.

But then it can shift just like that. No clinging, no resistance—just walking, movement, the sense of coolness, the sense of sharpness, the sense of constriction. And that's it. There's no resistance, no clinging. Nothing is changed about the situation, but it's just coldness, sensations, walking, breeze. That's it.

In that moment, the clinging to wanting experience to be different, the resisting—which is really just clinging turned around—resisting the sensations creates the sense of me. Looking at that, it drops away.

The actual situation is no different. The sense of self in that moment simply isn't there, and there's no problem. It's still just as cold. My body still reacts uncomfortably to cold. I didn't get home any quicker. It just doesn't matter. It's simply not a problem.

You can see that's not a big deal. And I know, just as Ajahn Buddhadasa said, that everybody has many, many moments like that throughout the day—really noticing. Not like, "Oh yes, I'm having an experience of anattā," because then it's gone; you're back, you're having an experience. But just the simplicity of: "Oh, just this. Just this. It's like this." That's the beauty of our mindfulness practice.

Buddhadasa likes to use the terms in the Pali language: *ahaṅkāra* and *mamaṅkāra*, which translate as "I-ing" and "my-ing." For those of you whose first language isn't English, does that make sense? I-ing and my-ing—making it a verb rather than a subject, which is sort of how it actually is. Something is being created in the moment.

And when I-ing comes up, my-ing comes up, it feels really real, doesn't it? Because it feels as though, unexamined—at least for me—unexamined, it feels as though it's always there, doesn't it? I mean, I am always here. Maybe not "my," but I am always here. It's so familiar, and the more I try to analyze it, the more I try to think about it, the stronger it gets, doesn't it? Because I'm thinking about it, and it just gets into this big knot.

This is from Dzigar Kongtrul Rinpoche. I like this a lot. He's talking about a Tibetan word, *shenpa*, which he says usually refers to the raw experience of the suffering of ego-clinging. He says it's generally translated as attachment, but that's not sufficient. Shenpa is a pervasive discomfort, the experience of I,

me, and mine—all the wants, needs, aversions, hopes, and fears that come out of that. The discomfort of shenpa can be vague and subtle, like having a stone in your shoe, or a sour note that plays throughout the day. I love that—just something's a little off and it bugs you. Or when the ego is strongly challenged, shenpa can be the painful charge of the negative emotions. By seeing and accepting the mechanisms of shenpa and self-importance, they no longer have a hold on us.

That's exactly what Buddhadasa is saying. Simply by seeing, understanding, and accepting how this sense of shenpa, of self, is created, it no longer has a hold on us. The main attitude on the path to peace is to accept whatever our experience brings—accept it and also recognize it accurately.

So that's what the invitation really is: to use our *sati-paññā*, our mindfulness-wisdom, to get interested, to notice the presence of I-ing and my-ing, whether just when it begins or however long it's been there. It doesn't matter. Notice it and then really get interested. Bring investigative wisdom, *dhamma-vicaya*, to really explore—not thinking about, but by bringing our attention to the actual experience in that moment that feels like me or mine.

I can feel it personally, and it's different each time, but there's a sense of a kind of contraction, that clinging, that holding on to something. That's already saying too much—holding on to something. But just a little sense of... it shrinks, it limits things. I can feel it.

So the first thing when we start to explore—this is Buddhadasa again—is that we see the sense of self is merely a condition that arises when there's grasping and clinging in the mind. That's all. This big, seemingly huge, endless monolith we spend all our practice trying to chip away and chip away and dynamite and fight with and hate ourselves over—it's just a momentary condition that arises when there's grasping and clinging in the mind.

So that gives us a little hint about how often grasping or clinging arises in our experience—or my experience, I'll speak for myself. I mean, I really get why non-clinging is the centerpiece of liberation. It's merely a condition that arises and passes, born out of contact with a sense object, with an experience, with a mental object.

I use this story all the time because it's so simple, but it really works. Notice the birth of self. It can be really clear. It's great on retreat. You have so much time to explore this. Because when things aren't so busy, when all the activities are kind of stripped away, you can notice in relationship to little things the birth of self. And the self feels just as big.

It doesn't matter if it's born in relation to a little thing.

So here's a story I always use. Once I was on retreat over at the retreat center, a long retreat, and I was pretty quiet. Things were just flowing. I mean, not always, but it was relatively what we misleadingly call a good time in practice. I was noticing things. I liked how it was going. Not a lot of suffering.

And I noticed this one time—over there you walk into the dining room and there's a big shelf with all the mugs and cups and dishes. At that time, we used to have many different kinds of mugs. Now they have more similar ones, but back then they were all different, just what people had left. And I'd just go, take a mug, take my dishes, eat, go.

One time, way into the retreat, I got a mug, I was getting my tea, and as I sat down I started thinking, wow, this mug is really the perfect mug. The good color, it fits my hand, it feels good on my mouth. And right in that moment there is: I like this mug, I want this mug, I want this mug again. It was so clear in that moment—the birth of me. Me. Me and my mug. Very clear.

So I sat there and instead of just being present with the tea, I thought, should I save it? We're not supposed to save it. Should I take it back to my room? We're not supposed to take it. No one will know and who cares anyway. But no, then every time I wanted tea I'd have to go back to my room and then come back here. And at the rate I was walking, that would take half the day, so forget it.

So then I put the mug back. Oh, death of me and my mug. It was just free and easy and fine. Incredibly complicated—that sense of self made everything complicated. It restricts what had been open, easy, just as it is. Everything gets quite constricted, limited. The mind, the consciousness gets limited. Everything gets complicated. You can feel in that moment the sense of grasping, almost like an inner contraction. You can feel that sense of me and then all the complications, the *papañca* that ensues from it. Put it down, went away. It was gone.

But I came back the next day and I looked for it. So already there was complication. And I found it. And I took it. And I went through the whole thing again, even more. And at that point, the suffering of it—I know this sounds ridiculous, like the suffering of liking a mug—but when your mind's quiet, you can really see it. This is ridiculous. All this planning, all this agitation, all this wanting. And I put it down, and that was it. It was over.

If only it could always be that easy.

But this is exactly dependent origination. This is the birth and death of me-ing and my-ing that happens for each of us hundreds of times in a day. It's a real blessing to notice the birth and notice the death. What we tend to do is notice the me and my mug, but we don't notice the death of it. Then we notice the me that doesn't like the complication, then we notice the me that's putting it back, then we notice the me that's wanting the next thing. And we forget to notice the times when there's no me-ing and my-ing, in between. Really important to notice the birth and death.

This is the dependent origination. This is from the Buddha, talking about this middle part, the continuation of the round of dependent origination: "On seeing a form with the eye"—like the mug—"he lusts after it if it's pleasing, or dislikes it if it's unpleasing. He abides with mindfulness of the body unestablished, with a limited mind."

And that's exactly how it feels. As soon as there's that clinging to something, the me and my arising, the mind feels limited, the heart feels limited.

He delights, and engaged as he is, whatever feeling he feels, he delights in that feeling, welcomes it, and remains holding to it. As he does so, delight arises in him. Now delight in feeling is clinging. With his clinging as condition, being comes to be. With being as condition, birth. With birth as condition, aging and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair come to be. Such is the origin of this whole mass of suffering.

So that's just talking about one moment of contact in this moment of life—that lusting after, that sense of me arising, the constriction of mind, and the whole mass of suffering. Notice when that arises. Notice when it dies. Notice the sense of limitlessness again, of space, of ease, of peace. It's not like some huge light going off. The sense of self simply fades and dies. Anatta is truly normal and natural. When there's no grasping or clinging in the mind, it's just the way things are.

I want to talk about a few areas—I won't by any means cover all of them tonight—but just a few of the grosser areas of our nama-rupa experience, of our mind and body experience, where clinging so easily creates a strong sense of me-ing and my-ing, and where we so often overlook or don't recognize the clinging. With the mug, I use that because it's a simple, obvious example. Of course it's recognizable. I didn't think the mug was me—it was the me who wanted it. But there's clinging to much more from experience that really seems so like me, where we think, "This is really where the sense of self is. Of course this is me. I'm not clinging to it. It is me." That's where our sati-pañña, our mindfulness wisdom, becomes so helpful.

The first and most obvious area—and in some ways the easiest to see through—is clinging and grasping that arises in relationship to sense contact with rupa, with our body, with physical experience. What I've found really helpful is nothing new; it's mindfulness. It's that willingness, that ability to meet with our attention the bare sensory experience, to see and tell the difference, to recognize accurately the sense experience without confusing it with the conceptual overlay. This is what starts to help us see when there's clinging.

Simple examples: when you're sitting and there's that pain, we talk about this all the time—the difference between noticing burning sensation and the overlay of "my back is hurting" or "I've hurt my back" or "I need to do X, Y, and Z." Just sensing.

Even more subtle is when there's a sense contact—say there's itching, or a lightness, a pleasant physical feeling—and the attention just connects, notices lightness. But do you notice how often there's a visual overlay, just a visual image of the body or that part of the body? Which is fine if we recognize this is seeing and this is feeling, burning or tickling. But when we don't recognize it, when we don't even recognize the seeing, there can be a subtle holding to that image as the description of my body. Do you see what I mean?

When I'm sitting, there can be periods where every single moment there's a lot of physical sensation and there's just a noticing of it. I don't have to be noting, just noticing—tightness or burning or tingling, just there. But with each one, there's a picture of my knee, there's a picture of my back, there's a picture of my whole body, there's a picture of my face noticing. And if I don't recognize that image, there can be this subtle sense of clinging—oh, that's me. It just feels like me. I'm not saying this is true for anybody else. It's just an example. Look and see.

Or "I'm hungry." It's the same as when I was walking in the wind today. The difference between sensations—bubbling sounds, gurgling, a feeling of discomfort—it's just that. "I'm hungry" is a thought. Just a thought. But clinging to the thought or holding to the sensation is immediately a sense of me. And then when you notice the sense of me, don't fight it or try to think about it. Just notice that's the next arising experience. Bubbling, gurgling, "Oh, I'm so hungry," sense of me. Feels like this.

Just notice how it comes and goes. Notice how when you're just breathing and there's just sensations of coolness, you can't even say that's a body—never mind *my* body. At times there's absolutely no form. There's just sensations, and as far as your actual experience, it's sensation arising in space. Can we just notice that? Let it be, or notice if right on top of it comes a sense of, "No, *my* body." And then just notice that. Get a sense of what I mean. Just explore this.

I don't want to say a lot more about body because we really pay a lot of attention to that. But I'm talking about the actual experience, not the idea of the body. The idea of the body, of course, we're much more likely to cling to. But that's actually not the physical—that's an idea. That's mental. That's sankhara.

Another aspect is vedana, the feeling tone. You all know what that is, right? The pleasant, unpleasant, neutral feeling tone. It's a mental experience, rather subtle often, that arises with every sense contact. So every sound, each of us will experience a particular sound as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral—every thought, every physical sensation.

And obviously, as we talk about it, because so often it's not the thing we pay attention to, it's often not the predominant experience. But it's very easy for a clinging to arise, an identification to arise, so that we experience, say, the pleasant feeling as being either me or mine—and not recognizing that that little clinging is going on. We can get into quite a little world of identification and complexity based on this clinging to pleasant or unpleasant vedana. Yes, we cling to unpleasant too. And not recognizing that is very easy to overlook.

For example, in the sitting—I just use sitting as examples because that's what we're doing—something's happening, and finally it's going right. Either the breath is smooth and the mind isn't wandering as much as it was before, or that's if you're someone who thinks what should be happening is that you should be with the breath and it should be smooth. The person next to you thinks that what should be happening is open awareness, and you're not even really noticing the breath, but the mind is just connecting with each arising experience and there's no hesitation and there's no wavering and it's really clear and it's really

penetrating—that's what they think should be happening. Someone else thinks something else should be happening. I'm just saying this so that you know there isn't one thing that's supposed to be happening. Our thinking that there is—that's the problem.

But anyway, it's finally going the way you think it's supposed to be. So take smooth breath, nice, peaceful, really noticing it, being there with it, the mind isn't wandering, and you even think, "I know this is going to change. I know this is going to change, and I'm not attached to this breath. I know it's going to change."

And of course, it does change. And you really thought you weren't attached to that sensation. So why are you so totally bummed out when it changes? Why?

There are lots of different things that can be happening, but one thing is that we weren't clinging—we could see we were clinging to the breath—but we were completely overlooking the pleasant feeling and totally clinging to the pleasant feeling. That contraction of *me* around that pleasantness. Not even the thought "it's finally going right" prior to that. "This is it. This is so nice."

I remember one time I was on retreat, and I don't even know what was happening, but something in the walking that I thought was really good and I liked it. My teacher—I think it was Sharon at the time—said, "Okay, you have to note 'pleasant.'" That's all she said. I knew what that meant. I went back and had a total little minor temper tantrum because I knew that as soon as I consciously noticed the pleasant, the sense of selfing around it would not keep on being created. You'd think I would like that, but we're attached to that. In some way, the sense of self, the clinging—whether it's to the pleasant or whatever—is so comfortable and familiar that even though we think we want to be free from it, given the choice, and we're given the choice millions of times in a day, we often go, "I want to cling to the pleasant. Don't tell me to notice the pleasant."

I'm going to walk, and I'm going to note, note, note, but I'm going to overlook pleasant. Because if I do that, the gratification of *me* having pleasant goes away. What goes away? Just that sense of me. That's all that goes away. It's really pathetic. It is. How many millions of times have I experienced the ease of—ah, death of the self? And how many more millions of times do I think, "Yeah, but not yet. Let's just enjoy this a little bit."

So, just noticing if something is pleasant or unpleasant, if there's that sense of *mine* or *me* around it. And just have a kind of eye out to explore. As Chokyi Nyima says, really watch the fickleness of the mind, especially in terms of vedana. Notice in our mind how easily it's influenced just by a pleasant or an unpleasant sight, thought, sound, anything. The mind is so fickle. We just have a pleasant sight and it influences us into an immediate mood, and then a whole story comes from it. Right? Then there's an unpleasant sound. The mind goes off into a whole other mood, a whole other story.

If we just notice that series of events, rather than jumping on each one as "yes, this is me, yes, this is mine," just notice. It's amazing. It's amazing how far the mind goes, how fast, based on how little. And if

you can just kind of get interested in watching that without hating it, without fearing it, without being afraid to see it—"Oh yeah, look at that *me* arising so strong about the noise that person is making in this sacred hall. Wow, that's amazing." And in that moment of just getting interested, "wow, that's amazing," in a way that's a moment of death of that sense of self, because the energy has moved from the clinging to "I like, I don't like," the pleasant, the unpleasant, to simple awareness. Wow. It's like that. In that moment, that's a death of self.

And it's just—I like to call it like a Tai Chi move. You don't actually have to do anything other than withdraw the clinging, all the identification, from whatever's happening. Say the pleasant, liking the pleasant, holding to the pleasant. "Oh, holding to the pleasant feels like this." We don't have to get rid of anything. We're not here to destroy the ego. We don't have to be afraid of experiencing a really strong sense of me-ing and my-ing. It's just a momentary arising experience, however subtle, however strong. And that freedom from it is just always right here. "Ah, me-ing feels like this." In that moment, that me-ing has died.

Nothing lasts more than an instant anyway. When we're paying attention, we'll see that. We can't not see it because that's how it is. We just, in a way, need to trust that more in our experience. If you feel like you have to set up some kind of amazing conditions in order to create the state of non-self, well, that gets beyond us and way out in the future. But if you really can have the—it's not a faith, it's just knowing that it's already how it is. There is no steady state you or me. There isn't one. So if you recognize that, your world isn't going to fall apart, because it's already like that. That's what's so amazing to me, just to me.

Okay, another huge area, and I'll talk a little bit about it but I don't want to go into too much, is emotions. I find emotions in some ways one of the most tenacious aspects of mental experience—tenacious in terms of really feeling like the emotion is me. So often we think the presence of particular difficult emotions is the barrier to peace, and the presence of the beautiful emotions when we're clinging to them can feel like the barrier to peace. But of course it's not. It doesn't even mean the emotions have to go away. The sense of real suffering from them is this identifying with them, clinging to them, thinking they are me or mine, either one.

So for each of us, I think we each have certain emotions that feel—I was saying to someone today, I forget what words we were using—they feel more like they're really *me*.

Disappointment feels like this. I can notice it. I don't go too far down the road. I know it comes. I know it goes.

For many people, the wholesome emotions are like this—they're ones that they easily see are not who they are. In fact, often to the point that they don't even recognize, "Oh, yeah, well, that's happiness. That's not me. That's going to go." You don't give it any weight.

But the other ones, whatever they are for you—often they're self-hatred, or feelings of loneliness, or the

judging voice, or feelings of worthlessness, or for some people a kind of deep sadness, loneliness, whatever it might be for you. And it can be different for each of us. There are certain ones that when they come in, they're often not even recognized at first, because this is really the core manifestation of who I am. And even though it seems like it just arose in this moment, I know that I just haven't noticed it. Because it's been there all along, but I've been being distracted by feeling the breath and noticing this other stuff. But now, here it is. Self-hatred. I'm home. This is really who I am.

And we wouldn't say that we were attached to it. Oh no, we're not attached to this. I hate it, for God's sake. I'm practicing so it'll go away. But in the moments of its arising, this is really like a clinging to—this is me, me and my-ing, my self-hatred. I'm this loathsome worm, whatever your particular way of saying it is.

And the first thing is, this is really one of the aspects of what's called *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*, which is like personality or identity view—really this clinging to any particular mental formation, any *saṅkhāra* emotion, as me or mine.

So first, just start noticing which ones, which particular emotions creep in under your radar. And then you might notice the sense of me around them, the clinging. But also, even if you don't notice that, do notice when that emotion goes away. You might not notice the moment it leaves, but notice when it's gone—just like I was saying about noticing when there's no sense of self. Notice when these so-called core personality emotions are gone. And really notice that they're gone. If your mind says stuff like, "Well, I'm just not noticing it. It's not really gone because I know it's who I am," just notice stuff like that. When it's not there, it's really not there. When it comes back, it really comes back. That's okay.

But notice how emotions then lead to thoughts like, "Oh, sadness. This is who I am. This is what my life is all about." And then of course the thoughts just carry on and get so complex. I think I'll talk more about thoughts the next time.

But there's the resistance, or the suffering from resisting the emotion itself, and there's also the kind of subtle clinging contraction around it: This is me. This is mine. Notice that. Notice the difference. To use Ajahn Sumedho's language, the difference between "takes sadness"—just sadness—and "my sadness." I'm so sad. This is really the depths of despair. How can I keep going? Whatever your story is.

The difference between "my sadness" and "sadness is like this"—feeling it just as fully, perhaps even more fully. Sadness is like this. Despair is like this. Loathing is like this. Joy is like this. The difference when there's the me-ing and my-ing versus when there's just the emotion as it is, received in awareness—this is really a huge difference.

You see, we don't have to fix our personality. We don't have to analyze any of the emotions. We don't have to get lost in the story about me, and we don't have to push away the story of me. We just notice it. Oh, sadness is like this. The thoughts that arise that make the sadness stronger are those thoughts. How can I feed the sadness? How can I feed identifying with it? Just keep going into those thoughts. Oh yeah, and

another thing. Oh yeah, and another thing. This feeds the sadness, feeds the anger, feeds whatever it is. Tuning back to awareness—oh, the sadness is like this. Oh, those thoughts come and go. Sadness is like this. This feeds the awareness, not the sadness.

And we can flip back and forth, back and forth, in every moment. And that's okay. It can be fascinating to do that back and forth—where you're really feeling the me-ness, the I-ness of a difficult emotion, and it's just unbearable. And the next moment: oh, it's like this.

I was sitting, I think it was in Burma a few years ago. It was really one of the more emotionally difficult retreats I'd done in years and years. For some reason, just this really intense despair and dukkha-filled emotions would come up. And I was pretty mindful. I was really watching it. I would notice an image come, I would notice the thought, I would notice the emotion start. I was really aware of the whole train. But each time it came, it kept coming so strong that I would get really caught in the me-ness of it, in the unbearableness of it. The emotion was: this is too much, I can't bear it. That's actually what the emotion was.

And I could see the whole process, but there kept being the sense of me, of mine, in which I really can't bear it. For a while, I just kept going on like that. I can't bear it. I can't bear it. And finally, I got really fascinated. What is the clinging here? I mean, I'm not clinging to that image. I wasn't clinging to the story. I wasn't really, after a while, hating the emotion, but I wasn't holding on to it either. And I kept thinking: I'm really seeing the whole thing coming and going. What's the clinging that I'm not seeing? Because I know when I really see, "Oh, that's me-ing"—just in that awareness, it might still be there, but the whole texture of it changes.

And this is something I've really been interested in. What I finally saw was what the clinging was to. When that emotion would come up—this is unbearable, this is so intense—the sense of me, not the emotion itself, but just that sense of me, which is very subtle, just that contraction, was so familiar, was so comfortable. That's actually what the clinging was to. It's totally unbearable, but "me"—you know, I'm home.

And that was fascinating, because since then I can recognize so often this subtle sense of me that refers experience back to me, and that little contraction of clinging keeps the whole cycle going until the clinging releases.

So the question that then came up is not so much about how to understand this emotion, how to get rid of it, how to fix it, how to purify my mind—but really: am I willing to be without self-referencing? Am I really willing to just let things arise—emotions, sights, sounds, thoughts, sensations, whatever—just to be so present that there's not even the tiniest referencing back to me?

And it's not a choice I can just make in my mind. But starting to notice that clinging to the habit of self-referencing, and the feeling at times of disconcertion—I don't like to be without self-referencing.

This comes not from a Buddhist teacher, but from one of these contemporary non-dual teachers: "Self-referencing is the mind's tendency to locate itself. When it's realized that there's no self apart from the perceiving, then the tendency to try to find oneself in any experience, insight, or concept ceases. What I'm talking about is a condition where the mind has no compulsive need to understand in terms of ideas or concepts or beliefs—a condition where you are no longer referencing the mind, your feelings, or emotions for security in any way."

Just imagine that: a condition where you are no longer referencing the mind, thoughts, feelings, or emotions for security in any way. So immediate. Just what's arising.

The sense of self is not some steady, unchanging thing that we have to get rid of. It simply arises in a moment of misperception, of clinging, and it vanishes when that misperception, when that clinging vanishes—which of course it will in any given moment. This self-referencing, trying to locate ourselves with thoughts, with moods, with feelings, with emotions—it's so familiar. We do it so automatically. And often we're suspicious of when we don't do it.

There's a phrase Ajahn Buddhadasa uses in another context, but I like it in this one: "volunteering for suffering." Do we want to volunteer for suffering? Then we can add on this whole sense of self-referencing.

I'll give you a simple example, and sometimes it pushes people's buttons a little bit—so that's good. One time when I was in Burma teaching, I was sitting and just noticing whatever was happening. I was noticing tickle, tickle, tickle, and just the different things, and then I would notice cough, cough, and then I was noticing heat, heat, and then tickle, tickle. This went on for a while.

You know how when you're deep in retreat, you really do stop referencing yourself? You just notice what's happening. You don't put it together into a story. So I was just noticing these different things. After a day or so, suddenly: "Oh, I've got bronchitis. This is bronchitis. I recognize this." Immediately there was this sense of referencing. This is what it is. This is my history. I've had bronchitis a certain number of times in the last five years. I get really sick. I can't afford to get sick. When this retreat is over, I have all these things I have to do. Total panic. Total me. A lot of suffering.

And I thought, wait a minute—that's a story. Just go back. Tickle, tickle, cough, cough. That whole thing just completely fell away. Tickle, tickle, cough, cough is just what it is.

Then I started playing with it, this volunteering for suffering. I'd think, "But maybe it really is bronchitis and I have to deal with it," and all of the emotions would come back. What am I going to do? I have to go to the doctor. My mind was malleable enough that I could play with it.

Do you get a sense of what I mean? Often we can't play with it. That sense of "I'm going to jump on the description, I'm going to jump on the self-referencing," and once I'm on, there's no way off. Volunteering for suffering.

Are we willing to even explore the possibility of being without self-referencing? The way the Buddha described this—and I'll end with this—was when he was talking to Bahiya. This is really that way of perceiving where there's no self apart from the perceiving.

The Buddha was talking to Bahiya. He said, "When in the seen is merely what is seen, in the heard is merely what is heard, in the imagined and what is thought in the mind is only that, when in the cognized is merely what is cognized, then, Bahiya, you will not be with that. When, Bahiya, you are not with that, then you will not be in that. When, Bahiya, you are not in that, then you will be neither here nor beyond nor in between the two. Just this is the end of suffering."

Neither here nor there nor in between the two. When the seen is merely what is seen, just this is the end of suffering.

That's not a steady state. That's in any particular moment.

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