Perception and Thought

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 54:59

Tonight I want to talk a bit about this paradox, this dilemma of thought. This arises once in a while in interviews, and occasionally it seems to be something of a problem in people's meditation. So I thought I'd offer some thoughts about it.

That's really interesting, right? Because if you just look at a thought, it's nothing. It's absolutely nothing. It's completely ephemeral, empty. "The floor is brown"—just nothing. "I'm a stupid jerk"—just nothing. Just emptiness going through. And yet it's so powerful. Our whole career, our whole world, really our whole sense of ourselves—the whole world is created by thought.

Look at the power of propaganda, for example. That's nothing but thought. I was watching a public television special on Goebbels, the propaganda minister from the beginning of the Third Reich through the Nazi time. Amazing—just how to manipulate, what thoughts to put out, repeating them over and over, preying on emotions. But it's all the work of thought. Quite amazing.

When thought isn't understood properly, that's when we get so seduced. We're seduced by the content, obviously completely wrapped up in it—like, don't like, upset, whatever. We're seduced by the strong mental states and emotions that come along with thought, often seduced by not even seeing them and getting even more involved in the content. Or we think that because there's this strong emotion, whatever the thought is saying really must be true, that it needs to be paid attention to. But generally, I find that's an inverse proportion.

Or in meditation—this isn't so much for people who don't meditate—we get totally seduced by the idea, the thought, that thoughts shouldn't be happening. That thought is bad, thought is a distraction, thought is a sign that your practice is no good, that you're getting nowhere. I'd be a millionaire if I had a dollar for every time someone came in and said, "I'm thinking more, there are more thoughts. My practice was going well, and now I have more thoughts." As if that's the end of the world.

So it's a paradox, a dilemma, right? This is from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche. I love the way he puts things—two paragraphs describing both sides of the paradox:

"What we normally call the mind is the deluded mind, a turbulent vortex of thoughts whipped up by attachment, anger, and ignorance. This mind, unlike enlightened awareness, is always being carried away by one delusion after another. Thoughts of hatred or attachment suddenly arise without warning"—did you ever notice that?—"triggered off by such circumstances as an unexpected meeting with an enemy or a friend." Triggered off by any circumstance, right? "And unless they are immediately noticed, met with

mindfulness, they quickly take root and proliferate.

"Yet, however strong these thoughts may seem, they are just thoughts and will eventually dissolve back into emptiness." Have you noticed that too? "Once you recognize the intrinsic nature of the mind, these thoughts that seem to appear and disappear all the time can no longer fool you. Just as clouds form, last for a while, and then dissolve back into the empty sky, so deluded thoughts arise, remain for a while, and then vanish in the voidness of mind. In reality, nothing at all has happened."

That's what I love. We can really see that nothing at all has happened. What a relief. End of the story.

Well, I'm going to continue, but that's really all we need to know. Seriously.

So let me talk about some different ways we get so caught up in these thoughts. By now, some of you have been here on silent retreat for a long time. Some of you have just come in the last day or two, but you've all done plenty of meditation before. So I'm sure you must all have the experience of thought that just comes and goes with no punch at all—like "the floor is brown." You can really get that sense.

You may not see it beginning and end, but you really get the sense it comes from nowhere, dissolves back into nothing, and really nothing at all has happened.

So what's the difference between that and the occasional other thought that somehow seems to have Velcro and a lot of other stuff going along with it?

I want to talk a little bit about perception and papañca, which is the process where we get so caught up. And then hopefully a little bit about how not all thoughts are unwholesome, either.

Really starting where thoughts begin, you could say, the way the Buddha spoke about it, is from the point of perception. And you all know what perception is, correct? That's the way the Buddha talked about it. It's a very specific mental factor that arises in each moment of sense contact. Seeing, smelling, hearing, tasting, physical sensation, mental activity, thought or emotion—the six sense experiences.

Whenever there's contact—sound, an ear that works, consciousness—when those three come together, that's contact, a moment of contact. And in that moment, according to the Buddha, there's naturally perception, which is simply the recognition factor, the discernment of what is arising in that moment. It could just be hearing. That's already perception, knowing that's hearing. Or it might just be a bird song. You don't even have to say the word, but there's just that recognition, that knowing. That's what's considered perception.

Obviously, perception is based on memory, on our past experience, on what we know. It could also be a perception of hearing something and not knowing what it is. That's also a perception.

This is arising in every moment. The Buddha says what one perceives, one thinks about. So often perception is what places us in a context. Even though we don't have conscious thoughts, a perception

generally comes together with the thoughts or almost-formed thoughts, the associations of context and place and meaning.

For example, when you looked at your watch or clock tonight, you saw the minute hand at 25 past 7. That's a whole lot of perceptions already—watch, minute hand, 25 past 7. That's a huge amount of perceptions, and we put it together. It means something. Not only that, you know it means you're here at this forest refuge. It's Monday night. It's time to go to the dharma talk. Again, that's a huge amount of thoughts, a huge amount of perception. All of it useful, extremely useful. We're not saying perception is a bad thing here, and the thoughts are also useful. They give us a context. Not a problem.

Now, often perception—well, almost always perception—that moment of perception, hearing birdsong, for example, in that moment of consciousness, the consciousness is the knowing and the perception is the recognition. In that moment of consciousness, it comes together with whatever mental factors, whatever mental states happen to be present at that moment. And those mental factors can, once in a while, disguise, distort, or actually make the perception inaccurate.

For example, it's like delusion, which puts a cloud over things. A classic example is walking in the forest and you see a snake and have all the reactions as if it were a snake. But when you get closer, you see it's just a rope. So the delusion, the not recognizing accurately, leads to a whole set of thoughts, emotions, and assumptions based on inaccurate perception. That's ignorance clouding the perception.

But equally, desire or anger or fear can color the perception, leading to inaccuracy. And from this, there can be a jumping off place. If we don't recognize that, if there's no mindful awareness with wisdom, then the thoughts, the reactions, the associations are all based on that inaccurate perception.

I remember once I was in the hospital. It was early morning—they come and get you out of bed at 5 a.m. to weigh you, and God knows why. I was out of it; someone had given me some painkillers or something.

But someone told me later there's something called ICU psychosis, where your perceptions become a little wacky, your mind goes a little crazy. Mine certainly was.

So this poor nurse—a nice lady, as I realized the next day—she came in, and I literally saw her as demonic. That's what I actually perceived. And I say "poor lady" because that seeing led to assumptions, which led to how I responded to her. Plus, I didn't want to get out of bed at 5 a.m. to be weighed.

And just like that—the next time I saw her, I could see through it. But a lot of the time we don't know that's happening. We don't even recognize perception as perception; it's just occurring every moment. Never mind whether it's accurate or not, or questioning it, or even having an openness to it.

What tends to happen is there's the perception, we assume it's accurate, and all the assumptions go along with it. We don't even know. And then the freshness of attention snaps shut. We know what it is, we *know*, and we just stop really meeting the experience freshly, moment to moment.

That's what happens with the breath, right? "Enough already with the breath." Or there's a pain that's been there—"I've had this pain ever since I began practice twenty years ago. I know this pain. I don't need to look at it. I know what it is."

Or have you ever had this experience? Those of you who've been here a while may find that without at all meaning to, as soon as someone walks into your field of vision—contact, seeing, perception—there's an immediate sense of all the baggage of assumptions and associations that your mind has created with that person. Do you have any sense of what I'm talking about here?

I've noticed for myself on retreat, I love it when I see how wrong the perception is. For example, over at the retreat center, in the bigger dining room, I'm sitting at the table, not looking up, not looking around. Someone comes and sits at the table. You don't look. I don't turn and look. But I *know* who it is, right? I know. I can just feel it. I know. I've got everybody scoped out.

So they're sitting there, and I can watch my mind go through all the reactions, all the associations this mind has created in regards to that person. Pleasant, unpleasant—they're eating sloppily. I knew they were. That's how they are.

And then I see that person who I thought was sitting beside me walk past way in the distance. It's like, *oh*. It's such a moment of startling, of the mind just letting go. I really had no clue. Let's start fresh.

It's really interesting. I read this article, and I really like this story. It's about perception—how we assume we know what's what, and we don't even meet the world freshly. This is what mindfulness is countering. This is the whole point of mindfulness.

The story is about an experiment in Washington, D.C., that the Washington Post newspaper arranged with one of the world-famous concert violinists, Joshua Bell. He's extremely well-known. They did an experiment where they had him, during the morning rush hour on a Monday morning, get dressed in just a baseball cap and jeans, take his—as they say—$3.5 million Stradivarius violin, and position himself at a really crowded subway stop.

It was at a place where the people coming out of the subway had to go up a long escalator, and he was positioned at the top playing his violin. So they had to hear him coming up the escalator. He just looked like anyone, his case open for money.

He had this incredible violin, and he was playing incredibly difficult, beautiful music. He wasn't playing something anyone could play. One of the pieces he played was Bach's Chaconne, which they say is very, very difficult—one of the most difficult—and fourteen minutes long. He's just playing it incredibly.

Anyone who knows music would recognize it. But they were saying the experiment was really to see if people would just recognize beauty without it being set up.

And they, of course, videoed it all. So it was fascinating because hardly anyone stopped to pay attention. It

was six minutes before the first person stopped to even listen.

They could question everybody afterward, because they had it all on videotape. This one man who stopped was coming up the escalator, and he said he was on his way to work. He wasn't particularly a musician, but coming up the escalator, he was just struck by it. He said, "I just felt really peaceful. I felt really happy." So he looked at his watch and saw he had three extra minutes. He went and waited against the wall and listened for his three requisite minutes, gave the guy some money—the first time he'd ever given a street musician money—and went on.

And that was like the maximum that anyone really stayed. Mostly no one stopped at all. A few people would look for a little while, give some money, and hurry on. They said there was no ethnic or demographic pattern to distinguish the people who stayed for a minute or who gave money. But there was one absolutely consistent thing: every single time a child walked past, he or she tried to stop and watch. And every single time, the parent was in a hurry and scooted the child away. Really interesting.

Also interesting was what Joshua Bell said afterward. It was a strange experience for him. He said, "You know, it's a very strange feeling that people were actually ignoring me." And he was laughing at himself. He said, "At a music hall, I'll get upset if someone coughs or if someone's cell phone goes off. But here my expectations quickly diminished. I started to appreciate any acknowledgment, even a slight glance up. I was oddly grateful when someone threw in a dollar instead of change." So he got thirty-two dollars for his forty-five minutes, and 1,070 people hurried by.

Then they had a quotation from Billy Collins, the poet, who once laughingly observed that all babies are born with a knowledge of poetry because the lub-dub of the mother's heart is in iambic meter. Then Collins said, "Life slowly starts to choke the poetry out of us." Maybe it's true with music, too.

So I don't know about that, but you get the sense: street musician, know-it-all, I'm in a hurry. We don't meet life freshly. We don't meet our experience freshly. And perception can play a part in this. That's one place where we get caught up and lost—we think we know. We don't even know that we think we know. We don't even know all the associations that are arising, and the mind snaps shut.

I notice this with political figures a lot. Certain political figures will come on the radio or the TV, and I know more than I want to know about them. I'm not even open to hearing one word. I just have to hear the tone of voice—it's over, it's off. And I remember, way back now with Nixon, something came on where they were saying something good about him, and I saw my mind so clearly: "I don't want to know anything good about this man. Let's not be open here. This is how it is, and I don't want anything to mess up my assumptions."

Dilgo Khyentse again: "When sense organs encounter an object—like the ear encountering sound—the only part the object itself plays is to initiate the process of perception in your consciousness. From then on, as your mind reacts to the object, influenced by all your accumulated habits and past experiences, the

whole process is entirely subjective. When your mind is full of anger, the world seems to be a hell realm. When your mind is peaceful, free from any clinging or fixation, you experience everything as primordially pure."

Then Ajahn Chah says it, of course, in his very direct, earthy way. He was holding up a vase. He says, "Look at this vase. You think it's nice, or you think it's ugly."

The vase itself is completely indifferent. It's we who are making ourselves insane. Can you relate? That's how it works.

So starting with perception—when it's fueled by unwholesome states of heart and mind, that's when we get what the Buddha calls *papañca*. And this is how he describes it: What one perceives, one thinks about. What one thinks about, one complicates—complicates with associations, notions, memories, ideas. This is the manufacture, the creation of *papañca*. And these notions then assail and overwhelm a person. In the commentaries it says it's "the tendency of the imagination to break loose and run riot." I think these old guys were very dour, but it's like that, isn't it?

When they talk about *papañca*, we can actually explore it. We don't have to be afraid of it. We can really use our mindfulness, our cultivation of moment-to-moment awareness, and turn it onto the process of perception, of thought, of this phenomenon of thoughts feeding on themselves, taking off, running riot. We can actually observe the whole process. And in the observing, as we well know, we've stepped out of believing it. We see, "Oh, it's just cause and effect." And again, no matter how intense or how out there the thoughts, the *papañca*, the craziness gets—when we're watching, at some point, no matter what it is, it dissolves back again into the nothing it came from.

You know those moments when you've been just completely crazed for the last hour, and then it's just gone? Nothing happened. What was that all about? Nothing. It's really gone. Let it be gone.

In the classic texts, in the commentary, they talk about three states of mind, three mental factors that most readily fuel this *papañca*, this habit of the mind to go so far so fast. We don't notice them, and we get lost in the content. So I just want to enunciate them a little. You know them all, but I want to talk about them in this context.

The classic ones are craving; *diṭṭhi*, or view, and particularly self-view, *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*; and the third is *māna*, or conceit, which is most observed in the process of comparing. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli, who was a German man, a monk for many years, a Pali scholar and teacher, added a fourth which I find really helpful: fear. Fear really fuels some major *papañca* when we don't recognize it.

Remember, it's not that this stuff is a problem when we see it. It's just the next arising mental object of awareness. We don't have to fix it. When we see what's happening, we don't have to get so caught in believing it. When we don't see what's happening, we're seduced. We're gone.

Craving and fear I'll put together. Obviously we understand—we know what craving is, right? You've had the experience once in a while. Fear is recognizable too. Just begin to notice, or continue to notice, how when craving, when wanting is in the mind, it colors the perception. You know the phrase that Tibetans use, that craving "puts feathers on the object." It makes the object more attractive, more desirable, whatever it is.

I remember—this is weird—but one time I was on retreat and I kept having this thought, a mental image, this picture that would come up of a street corner in Bangkok. Not at all a nice street corner. A corner of very busy streets with all these little sidewalk shops that sold plumbing fixtures and parts. But it would come up together with craving. God knows why. There was craving in the mind, and I'd go, "Oh, Bangkok! Oh, Banglamphu!" And even then I'd think, "What?" But it kept happening like that. And in the moments when I didn't notice it, I'd go off into a whole fantasy about Bangkok. "I want to go to Banglamphu!" There's nothing charming about Banglamphu—it's just crowds and fighting the crowds. It was so humorous. I could see how the process happened. It doesn't have to make sense.

It's more a problem when it does make sense.

So the whole phenomenon of getting a crush on somebody, on or off retreat—it doesn't just happen on retreat, unfortunately—but when the mind has got craving associated with a person, aren't they beautiful? Aren't they handsome? They walk so sweetly, the way they dress is so lovely, how they eat—everything. And then when the crush is gone, the person hasn't changed that much. You look at them and go, "What was that all about? Thank God we were in silence and I didn't go anywhere with it." The person didn't change. Maybe they changed their socks, but not a whole lot else changed. It's just what's going on in the mind. So craving distorts the perception.

Papañca is then the series of thoughts that, with craving, often move into what I call papañca of action. We act on it. Sitting here on retreat, one of the reasons we restrict what's going on is so there's less you can act on. But how often, if something comes up in the mind, you really think, "That would be nice. I need some long underwear. The fall is coming." Next thing you know, you're on the computer—but no, you can't do this, you can't go on the computer. But next thing you know, you're on the computer surfing, and all of a sudden all these things are being delivered by FedEx: long underwear and gloves and boots. And when it comes, by that time you're like, "Huh? Got a little carried away by craving, by acting." That's papañca of craving.

Or you're just doing your walking meditation, and the thought of tea comes up, colored with craving. Next thing you know, you've finished the tea. You don't even know how you got from the walking meditation to the dining room. You don't remember making tea. You didn't even like it. It's gone. But craving—that's papañca of craving. Pretty obvious when we're looking at it this way. But look back at how much it runs our life. It's actually shocking how much papañca—the thoughts driven by perceptions based on craving leading to action—runs our life.

And we know how much suffering craving brings, how difficult it can be to just be present and mindful with wanting, wanting, wanting, and not go into the thoughts. The thoughts can come, let them come. We don't hate the thoughts, but we don't have to be seduced by them. It's just papañca fueled by craving. And just because the craving is really strong doesn't make the thoughts more true. So just noticing that is really interesting.

There's a little story I like from Andrea Levine, Stephen Levine's wife, about this—how unreliable the mind is in this way, yet how persuasive it is. She says, you know, you're sitting there eating a piece of chocolate cake and there's more, and the mind says, "Oh, have another piece of cake. It's so good. You'll be so happy. It's just what you need to top off the day. Just have another piece of chocolate cake." On and on, papañca, until finally we just eat the cake to shut up the mind. And then you eat it, and the mind goes, "I wouldn't have done that if I were you."

So that's papañca driven by craving. Not very reliable, but certainly we can recognize it.

The second one is papañca that's driven by diṭṭhi. Diṭṭhi is the word for "view" in Pali. Mostly we're talking about sakkāya-diṭṭhi, identity view. But I just want to mention how any series of thoughts can coagulate, can solidify into a view—a perception that "this is like this." We believe the perception. And then the series of thoughts follows from that. When I say it hardens into a view, it's that place where our clear seeing, our beginner's mind, has snapped shut. We're not seeing freshly.

We're seeing through the view. And the way the Buddha describes view is the mind that says—although it never says it so clearly—"this alone is true, everything else is false."

So for example, when I was thinking about Nixon, the view was really: this is a horrible man and there can't possibly be anything good about him. And the mind doesn't want to see. That's the view.

Well, we do that a lot. Really a lot.

Just to give examples based on meditation—that's one of the big areas of suffering I see with people on meditation retreats, and even with some people here I've seen it happen—where the mind constructs a view of what proper or good meditation is. You may not even know you're doing it.

But it's really a privilege being on the meeting-with-you-all side of things, because I can see how people can come in with totally opposite views, both completely convinced that this is right and that's not what's happening, and so my meditation's a mess.

It can be: there should just be breath and no thoughts. It can be: there should be really deep access to emotions. It can be: if there are deep emotions, it means I'm not concentrated enough, it's not going right. It can be: I should be mindful every single moment. It can be: whatever happens is fine, I'm relaxed as long as there's no tension. Whatever.

A view is not a problem when we recognize it. It's just another thought. "Oh, it should be like this—that's

right meditation." That's just another thought. Unrecognized, as I said, it snaps our awareness shut. There's not an openness. There's not a willingness to just be with the unknown. And it actually creates a selective perception in the mind, like that thing with Nixon: I'll only let in the perceptions that fit the view. Well, of course, we're not doing that consciously so much.

So this is a real example I use often. I was teaching a retreat many years ago in California with another teacher, James, and even then I had to sit in a chair. There were about fifty people at this retreat, and quite a few were pretty new. About the fifth or sixth day in, I was having an interview with a woman for whom this was her first long retreat. She was in agony with sitting on the floor, sitting cross-legged. I mean, we all have pain, but sometimes it's such agony that one is just totally fighting it. And it's basically stupid—it's a waste of time.

When she saw me, she said that the last five days, all she'd been doing was getting lost in aversion and pain and a sense of total failure sitting on the floor. And of course, in the beginning, we said—as we always say—floor, bench, chair, it doesn't matter.

So she said, fifth day, she's sitting there thinking, "I can't do this. The whole meditation's about sitting like this, and I can't do it. I'm useless." And she looked up and said, "Oh, Carol's sitting on a chair." Five days! And we were at every sitting when we were doing that retreat—it's not like I just came in in the evening. It's amazing, the power of selective perception to fit a view.

And the view is often a suffering view, a view of oneself: I can't, it should be like this, and I can't do it.

So that leads into *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*—identity or personality view. She was doing that, for example. She was just having the view that proper meditation, the only way to meditate, is to sit cross-legged. That's just a view. The *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*, the personality view, was: I can't do it, I'm a failure.

That could just be a thought. "I can't do it. I'm a failure." It's a thought just like "the floor is brown," "the sky is blue," "today is Monday."

It doesn't have to pack any punch. We don't have to be seduced by it. It's not like we have to get rid of that thought—we just see it. "Oh yes, rising from conditions and going away."

But when we really believe it, holding to it, and the papañca continues on and on from it, that's when it's really sakkāya-diṭṭhi, this personality view, this holding on to some aspect of nāma-rūpa, of one of the six sense contacts—a thought, an emotion, a sight, a sound, a feeling in the body—thinking of it as me or mine and kind of carrying it around with us. Like one of my teachers used to say, it's like carrying a dead corpse around with you all the time.

You know this famous Zen story, very famous, of two monks—an older monk and a young one. They're walking and they come to a river that they have to cross, and there's a beautiful young woman who can't get across. So the old monk picks her up, carries her across, puts her down, and they walk on. Nothing's

said. After quite a while, a couple of hours, the young monk finally bursts out, "I can't stand it anymore! How could you do that? You know it's against your precepts to touch that beautiful young woman, and you completely disregarded that!" He was really upset. And the old monk said, "I put her down at the river. You've still been carrying her these last two hours."

That's sakkāya-diṭṭhi, right?

So we take any thought, any mood, anything that comes—and we carry it with us through the day. Actually, there's no way you can really carry it all the time, but we think we're carrying it with us. We say, "Is this always here? This feeling of worthlessness, this sense of not being good enough, this angry personality I have"—you know, whatever. Or occasionally, "this incredible, wonderful being that I am." Very rarely, but once in a while, that's the one people carry. "Even when I'm not noticing it, I know it's there under the surface." Are you familiar with that feeling? "Even when I'm just sitting, being with seeing and hearing, seeing the beauty of the leaves, there's a feeling of happiness. It's just that in that moment I'm not noticing the sense of total worthlessness and aversion, but it's there because that's who I am. That's me."

That's sakkāya-diṭṭhi. And I don't think I have to elaborate too much on how much papañca can arise from that.

This is something I love to see, actually. I really love playing with it on retreat—though you can do it off retreat too, of course—to notice how quickly almost any sense contact can move into sakkāya-diṭṭhi, into "it's all about me." It doesn't have to when the mind is clear, but how quickly, with diṭṭhi, with view and craving, papañca just ripples out.

So, for example, walking outside today, I was just walking. The leaves are beautiful, right? I love this feeling of fall. So I'm already there: "I love this feeling of fall." And immediately—it's like there's the leaf, how much I love it, it's so beautiful, the smell in the air, the memory of so many past falls, a feeling of kind of sadness that comes in the fall. "Oh, me—I'm experiencing that feeling of sadness. It reminds me of all these other falls, another year gone, blah, blah, blah, blah." It could be pleasant or not. It doesn't matter. But I've gone in one second from just smelling—just smelling—to the whole story of Carol's life, you know, poignant and sad and this and that.

That's a pretty neutral example. It wasn't really upsetting. But it could be. It could involve really strong craving, really strong upset. We could get caught in it for a really long time if it's a little more juicy.

How often is it that someone will tell me about an unpleasant sound and get lost in "What does that mean? Why are they doing that? How can they be like that?" And it reminds them of something from their past—"My father used to do this." I remember one retreat where some guy was being driven insane. Okay, I'm exaggerating a little, right? He wasn't really being driven insane.

by someone's loud breathing near him in the three-month retreat. As a friend of mine, we'd talk and talk.

It took him weeks to realize—I mean, he was just spinning out with thinking about that person and his life. It took him weeks to realize that the breathing sound had triggered a memory of his father, of some way his father sounded when he was angry with him. And it was just completely spinning him out of control. Papañca.

Often we don't see what associations are coming with the perception, and the papañca just takes off.

So that's the sakkāya-diṭṭhi. And it's mostly—it's Joseph's line. Joseph loves to say, "We're just making it all up." There's just sense contact. It's pleasant or unpleasant. There's a perception. And then the imagination just breaks loose and runs riot. We're just making it up.

As Nisargadatta says, "The world appears to you so overwhelmingly real because you think about it all the time. Cease thinking about it and it will dissolve into thin mist."

And we can notice that over and over. You might also notice you don't really want it to dissolve into thin mist. And that's another thing that keeps us spinning in the sakkāya-diṭṭhi and the papañca of it.

The third aspect, the third thing that fuels papañca, is māna—conceit, conceit of self, as it's described. But the best way to explore it is through this habit of the mind of comparing. Have you noticed your mind doing that at all in these days here? And how much thought that leads to, and what a charge that often has?

So much comparing is with others. First, that sense of how you can't bear to have someone walk by without looking to see who it is. It's a well-known phenomenon, totally bizarre, but it's very well-known. And then as soon as we've looked, immediately the mind goes into comparing. They're this, they're that, they're better, they're worse, we're the same—whatever. How people are sitting, how people are eating, how people are moving. And it's all dukkha, it's all suffering. But it leads to a huge amount of papañca and thinking.

"They're walking so slow. How come? I wonder what kind of practice they're doing. I remember when I was doing practice and I was walking so slow. And now I'm not. I wonder which is better. I wonder if I should be slowing down and noting. I remember when I did that. But no, I really get into striving. Maybe I'll just be free and easy. I'll just walk outside and be free and easy."

And all of this is going on in one step. Gone. Comparing.

We could just be with seeing. Just seeing. Perception. Pleasant, unpleasant. That's all. It doesn't have to go into all those worlds of creation.

We compare with our own past experience, and this is a huge source of comparing. Just notice that. Previously, other retreats, last sitting, yesterday—"it was like this." Just notice that comparing. Notice the way, when we're not aware of it, it leads into a whole series, a whole train of thoughts, construction of self, suffering.

We get really seduced by it. That's mana—that's conceit. It's going to keep coming. Of all the ten fetters in the Theravada view, where different fetters drop away at different levels of awakening, mana is the last one to go. So don't get upset at yourself when you see it happening. But notice it, and then it doesn't have to go into all the papañca.

We compare with each other, with our past experience, with a view—very much a view and idea of what practice should be, or how I should be. "I should always be a compassionate person, and I'm not"—whatever it might be. We compare with that, and the whole sense of not being good enough can get really strong. Or "I'm great"—either one. Again, you're back to sakkāya-diṭṭhi.

Working with mana, with comparing, I find it to be a great dining room practice in a retreat setting like this. It's a good practice in the hall too, but hopefully most people are sitting with their eyes closed and not checking everybody out. In the dining room, though, you have to have your eyes open. You have to go through the food line, hopefully knowing what you're doing, noticing other people. So just be aware when this comparing kicks in. Notice how soon you notice it. Are you way down the road? Has the papañca been running for five minutes? Great—notice it then. "Oh, that's comparing." Let it dissolve into thin mist. Maybe you notice it right away.

Some people have told me, and I have the same experience: I can be walking by myself, no one around, completely calm, serene, present. Then just one person comes into sight—not even close, but way in the distance—and immediately there's a tightness, a comparing, a sense of clenching. Just noticing.

Noticing in the dining room with comparing—make a game of it. Not that we're afraid of it, but just noticing how there can be comparing and it doesn't have to go to papañca. There can be comparing and it does go to papañca. Notice how that works, what the effect is, where the suffering is, where the freedom is. It's not that we have to be afraid of these things, but to cultivate the interest, the willingness to simply explore thought as an object arising together with different mental factors, the perception—and to really see the difference when it's just dissolving into thin mist versus when it's coming with a punch and we're getting caught. Not to judge ourselves, but to get interested, to see how it works. Really quite fascinating.

This is from one of my teachers, talking about thinking: "It does not matter whether thinking stops or not. It's more important that you understand whether your thoughts are skillful or unskillful, appropriate or inappropriate, necessary or unnecessary. Mostly they're unnecessary. This is why it's essential to learn to watch thinking without getting involved. When a thought keeps growing, no matter how much effort you put into trying to simply observe it, you're probably somehow involved in the thought. When this happens, when thinking becomes so powerful, so incessant that you can no longer observe it, that's when you stop looking at the thoughts and watch the underlying feelings or the bodily sensations instead."

From my experience—I don't know if I could say always, but it's close to always—whenever thoughts come with a punch and they're really pulling, and it's more than just one thought, when you're really getting caught, there's an underlying feeling, an underlying mental factor. So we don't hate the thought;

we just see the thought. But we enlarge the awareness to notice, to be with that underlying energy—the papañca energies I was talking about: fear, wanting. Just being with it and seeing how that fuels thought. When we're watching all of that, thought is no problem. It's just another arising experience, just like sound, just like sensation—literally. And when we no longer need to get rid of it or fight with it or hate it or take it personally, it really starts to lose its power.

This is from Ramana Maharshi. He's talking about watching the mind with full attention: "Whenever the mind wanders, just notice it. Notice how thoughts connect with each other and watch how this ghost called mind catches hold of all your thoughts and says, 'This is my thought.' Watch the ways of the mind without identifying with them in any way. When you give your mind your full, detached attention, you begin to understand, to see the futility of all these mental activities. Watch the mind wandering here and there, seeking out useless or unnecessary things or ideas which will ultimately only create misery for itself."

Watching the mind gives us a knowledge of its inner processes. It allows for the wisdom to arise that we become more and more detached from our thoughts. Ultimately, if we notice steadily and long enough, it allows for the wisdom to arise to remain as consciousness, unaffected by transient thoughts.

So it's not that we're trying to get rid of thoughts—simply to understand, simply to see the cause and effect. And the more we see it, you can't help but notice. Wisdom arises in the awareness. You can't help but notice the energy, the unnecessary complications, the unnecessary suffering. And it really does happen by itself.

I'll give you an example from my own life of long ago, when I was so grateful for this wisdom of mindfulness. Almost twenty years ago, I was coming down with some chronic disease that no one knew what it was. It had a lot of effect on my movements. It was quite painful in my joints. At the time, before anyone knew what it was—I just wrote this to someone the other day—I remember so clearly, one day I was leaning down to wash the bathtub or something, and it was really difficult to bend down, it hurt to move, and my mind started off like, "Poor me." And then that jumping into the future from fear, the papañca of fear: "What's this going to be like? If I can't move, I won't be able to take walks. I'll never be in a relationship. I can't even clean the bathtub. How am I going to function?"

And I just saw the mind starting off like that. Without aversion or anything, I saw that happening. And the wisdom just said, "That's completely unknown. There's no point in going there. It's completely useless." And that wasn't said with aversion. That was just totally wisdom-like—boom. And it didn't go there. And from then on, really, it never went there. The mind would start off one or two thoughts, awareness would immediately notice it, and just the energy of it would completely drop out. That wasn't striving. That wasn't willpower. That's wisdom. And it comes from simply just watching what thoughts do and seeing that total emptiness of them.

The most horrific thought in the world dissolves just like the most beautiful one. And the emotions

underneath them—we just need to see that. Emotions are emotions, but they're not thoughts. We don't have to get so caught in believing them.

The Buddha said that the end of papañca is the end of conflict. We can notice that just in a moment, like that example I just gave. "Oh, what am I going to do?" Papañca's gone, the conflict is gone. What's happening now is just what's happening now—in very simple ways.

Someone gave me an example today of noticing how mind is in a really calm quantum of space, and say, for example, a pain would come up in her foot, and it would just be that sensation. The mind just doesn't create anything around it. No papañca, no reaction, no creation of sakkāya-diṭṭhi, identity view. It's nothing. It's just a sensation coming and going. In that moment, that's the end of conflict.

I want to end with this from Dilgo Khyentse again, because I like when he's on the really challenging "this is how it is" aspect. But it's possible for us to notice that:

All phenomena of samsara and nirvana arise like a rainbow. And like a rainbow, they are empty of tangible existence. Once you recognize the true nature of reality, which is empty and at the same time appears as the phenomenal world, your mind ceases to be under the power of delusion. If you know how to leave your thoughts free to dissolve by themselves as they arise, they will cross your mind as a bird crosses the sky—without leaving any trace.

So let's just sit quietly for a moment.

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