Silence of the Non-Reactive Mind

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 59:27

So yesterday I found myself musing about silence, stillness. It was just such a lovely day when I would walk out of here in the morning and be looking outside, and I got that reflection back of the silence.

I really mean not external silence. And I don't mean the silence of deep samadhi, or of no thought exactly, but that silence of the non-reactive heart and mind. That stillness, that peace when the mind and heart is not concocting something, is not picking up something—any perception—and making something of it. I just kept musing about that quality of silence.

Yesterday I was reading in this book called *The Island*, which is a great book—a new anthology by Ajahn Pasanno and Ajahn Amaro where they put together basically all different sutta references and many other references pertaining to Nibbana in any way. It's very well put together, a great compilation. I was reading a particular chapter about a word that I love: *atammayata*, which basically means non-fabricating, non-concocting, non-identifying. It's really, in some ways, the state or non-state when the heart, the mind is independent—not affected by greed, hatred, or delusion. That pure state of heart and mind is not involved in concocting any sense of self or any sense of anything in relationship to any perception.

Of course, in the highest, most profound level, that's Nibbana, freedom. But this is also following on a theme I was talking about last week. We can explore what that silence means in our own moment-to-moment experience—not to pick up anything, not to make anything of anything, but not to try and stop experience. Even more, we get the chance to explore how the concocting and fabrication happens, to observe the process. Sometimes it's even quite possible to observe the process of fabricating without actually fabricating anything around it, if that makes sense.

A couple of different people have given me examples in the last two days of seeing a perception and a whole amount of anger coming—a whole pattern that they're used to, that they've seen a million times—and the whole thing's going, and the heart-mind's just watching it without being involved. You get a sense of your personality running its show, but the mind's just observing: "Oh yeah, it's like this," and it just bubbles up and disappears. It's quite possible to do that, so we can explore.

I love this passage from *The Island*. It's from one of their Thai teachers, Lungphu Dun, who was a disciple of Ajahn Mun. It's his way of re-describing the Four Noble Truths. Just take it in terms of this mind constructing and making suffering.

He says: "The mind that goes out in order to satisfy its moods is the cause of suffering. The result that

comes from the mind going out in order to satisfy its moods is suffering." So that's the second truth and the first truth. "The mind seeing the mind clearly is the path leading to the cessation of suffering. The result of the mind seeing the mind clearly is the cessation of suffering."

I just love that. Very simple, but I could really feel it—that way of putting it: the mind that goes out in order to satisfy its moods is the cause of suffering. And the effect that we experience when the mind and heart goes out and constructs a whole *mishigas* in relationship to its moods—that's suffering. Probably we wouldn't argue too much with that second one, that that's suffering. But just to explore that sense that it really feels like the mind reacts to something, goes out, creates the whole story, creates the world, creates suffering.

So how does that happen? That is the exact definition of this mental proliferation, or *papañca*. This is from the suttas:

Dependent on the eye and forms, eye consciousness arises. The meeting of these three—eye, forms, and eye consciousness—is sense contact. With sense contact as condition, there is feeling, *vedana*: pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral feeling. What one feels, that one perceives. What one perceives, that one thinks about. What one thinks about, that one mentally proliferates. With such conceptual proliferation, *papañca* , as the source, the heart is beset by mental perceptions and notions characterized by the prolific tendency with respect to past, future, and present forms cognizable through the eye—so too with ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind.

So we know that, but that's clear.

Simply contact, seeing arises. With seeing, there comes feeling. It's felt with the mind as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. And feeling and perception come together. What one feels, one perceives. We perceive it as good, as bad, as this or that, and the whole show unfolds just like that. Over and over and over.

What one feels, that one perceives. It happens so fast. We know this—none of this is news to anybody. But I'm wanting to go over it, to explore this really amazing process by which the mind goes out in response to, in reaction to, feeling and perception.

And we all know the reverse. When there's wisdom, when there's mindfulness, just the simple being present with what is, without reactivity, without liking or disliking, when there's wisdom to just see it, the tendency to go out is sometimes consciously restrained. Or if the wisdom and mindfulness is even stronger, the tendency to go out just doesn't arise at all.

That's the heart and mind at peace. That's that sense of what you could call silence or stillness. And when it's like that—what's the problem? Because the tendency to go out and make up a whole story just doesn't arise. Sometimes people say they're almost looking for it: "Come on, where's the selfing in that? The wanting must be here somewhere." And they can make a whole story of that. But without going that far,

you kind of look, and it really isn't arising. Pure mind, pure heart in that moment. The stillness of non-fabrication. Beautiful.

Of course, there are many ways to explore this fabrication. I'm just going onto the train my mind was working on the last couple of days, which is on this level of vedana and saññā—of feeling tone and perception—that arise together at the point of contact, that as the Buddha says, feed... Well, actually, that wasn't the Buddha who was saying that. That was Mahakassapa. But the Buddha said, "I would have said the same thing," so it counts.

Every now and then, the Buddha would give a short talk. The monks would say thank you, he'd go away, and then they'd look at each other: "What was he talking about? That was too complicated. Who can we go ask?" And they would go ask one or another of the senior monks, and occasionally a senior nun. Then the whole sutta is this other monk or nun talking. At the end, of course, they all go back to the Buddha and say, "We asked him this, and he said this—what do you think?" And the Buddha says, "Yes, just as they said, so I would have said, so you should remember it." So then it gets into the suttas—if it was one of those. We don't know about the times the Buddha said he was really off. That didn't make it in.

So, to explore the sense of vedana and saññā, and how quickly and how deeply the habit of perception is linked to vedana. This again we all really know, but I keep getting amazed at how deep and subtle this habitual saññā, this perception, can be. When at contact the sight, the sound, the smell, the taste, the feeling, the thought, the mood is pleasant, the perception of it—first we perceive it as pleasant, but the perception is on some level "right" or "good" or "how it should be." And when it's unpleasant, so close is the saññā, the perception, that it's "bad" or "wrong" or "need to get away from this."

We know this, but it's just so deeply in there that so often we don't even recognize it. We may recognize the vedana, we may not. We often don't recognize that perception. And that is exactly where the proliferation begins to take off.

This is from Santikaro, translating Buddhadasa, who used to talk a lot about rising above positive and negative.

So I don't want to talk about being above, but this is just where this language is coming from. He says, "Human beings instinctively feel and perceive—so vedana and perception—experience as being either positive or negative." It's just our deep habit. And so this leads to evaluating and judging those experiences, which turns into liking and disliking those experiences, which in turn fosters craving, attachment, and selfishness—the whole mass of dukkha and misery. The mind that has, as Buddhadasa termed, gone beyond positive and negative, cannot be pulled into this conditioned arising of dukkha.

I don't like so much this language of going beyond, because that feeds into our striving mind. There's somewhere else to go. And right away, we want to go beyond because already positive and negative is bad. You see how fast we go there? "I need to go beyond it because that's wrong." We're right there—in the

vedana and saññā, perceiving it as bad, wrong, should change. When we're just not caught one way or the other, not needing to evaluate, that's when there's this non-fabrication, this stillness.

As Buddhadasa says, though, it's such a deeply conditioned habit. Talking to people and watching my own experience, I see how often the mind, as Ajahn Dunn says, goes out in response to moods and creates suffering. How often the trigger for that is the perception of something unpleasant, disliked, or held with the idea that this should not be happening. Usually it's unpleasant. If it's not unpleasant, then it doesn't conform with an idea we're holding of how things should be.

I'm talking about our practice right now, but this is the same as in our life. In practice here, how much of the suffering—the mental striving and trying to fix and reorganize, all the self-judgment—comes from some sense that this should be different, that it's not quite okay? Rarely is it pleasant when the mind goes there, though it could be. But how deeply ingrained is this belief that I can somehow hold myself separate from this unwanted experience, or that this unwanted experience is proof that something's wrong, that I'm bad. Something needs to be different for there to be peace, for there to be silence, for there to be stillness.

Somehow this deep sense arises that peace and freedom—keep looking in your mind because it gets so subtle—somehow comes back to this entrancement with the positive, to use Buddhadasa's language. This subtle sense that liberation is a movement towards more and more pleasant, away from the unpleasant. And when something's going well and it's pleasant and clear, and then it changes and contracts and gets cloudy and all kinds of junk is happening and you can't notice what's going on—well, that's a problem. Now we've hit a problem. Something's wrong because it's supposed to be this other way. That's what practice is about. That's what life is about.

I don't remember if it was the Buddha or Sariputta who said this, but whatever is felt is included within dukkha, included within the first noble truth. Not just unpleasant vedana is included within dukkha while pleasant vedana is down there in the third noble truth, cessation. I don't think so. Whatever is felt is included within dukkha—in terms of unreliable, in terms of not self, in terms of not bringing us any kind of reliable satisfaction. But the habit is so strong.

There's that sutta from the Buddha about the two darts, which I love. He describes how these habits come to underlie our heart and mind. The setup is: if someone has a painful feeling, and the unenlightened worldling—there was a translation I saw that rendered this word, which is often translated as "unenlightened worldling" or "ordinary person," as "thickster." I loved it. A thickster. So when a thickster is touched with an unpleasant sensation, they beat their breast and lament and grieve and wail. It's like shooting yourself with a second arrow. So they experience two kinds of feelings: a bodily and a mental unpleasant feeling.

The thickster, having been touched by that painful feeling, resists and resents it. Then in one who so resists a painful feeling, the underlying tendency of resistance comes to be a habit in the mind. It becomes

a habit to resist unpleasant feeling. And under the impact of that painful feeling, one proceeds to search for and enjoy sensual happiness. Why? Because an untaught worldling does not know of any other escape from painful feelings except the enjoyment of sensual happiness. Then, in one who enjoys sensual happiness, the underlying tendency of lust, of craving for pleasant feelings, comes to underlie the mind.

One does not know, according to how it is, the arising and ending of these feelings. One doesn't know the gratification, the danger, and the escape connected with these feelings, doesn't see them clearly. And so in one who lacks that knowledge, the underlying tendency to ignorance as to neutral feelings comes to underlie the mind.

So when he experiences either pleasant, painful, or neutral, he feels it as one who is fettered by that feeling, who is chained by that feeling, simply through not seeing it as it is.

I actually find this personally really poignant—this sense of how deep the habit is when touched by something unpleasant or painful. We get into resistance, and some with the aversive temperament tend to notice the resistance more, tend to kind of muck around in that mental state for a while. But from that, you could say the more desiring temperament or the habit of mind in some is stronger, and it just zooms into looking for something to lust after, something that's more pleasant. And then that becomes the habit that underlies the mind.

As the Buddha says, what the mind frequently dwells and ponders upon, that is how it will naturally incline. And so just this very simple experience that's happening to us with every moment of sense contact—that's pretty much every moment we're awake: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, contact—there's feeling and there's perception. And so often when there's not mindfulness, and sometimes even when we are watching, this speed of concocting moods, our whole story of self and other and past and future, comes to be. Just like that. Just based on vedanā and saññā.

As you know, the three sources of papañca—this is from the commentaries—tend to be craving, attachment to views, and māna, or conceit, the subtle sense of self, the subtle comparing. But you can see, just starting with craving papañca, how we think of papañca as just lots of thoughts coming really quickly, but how really it is that perception and those thoughts are creating our world in that moment. Many worlds, over and over, with every new construction. But this is really the confusion, the delusion that keeps us kind of off balance with the world, with ourself, with what's happening, because we're basically making it all up.

Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche says: "When our sense organs encounter an object, the only part the object itself plays is to initiate the process of perception in your consciousness." So when there's the sound, that sound is the object, your ear works, there's hearing of it. Perception would be "bell" or whatever perception you had. "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."

And we know this really, if we look at it. When your mind is full of anger, the whole world seems to be a hell realm. When your mind is peaceful, free from any clinging or fixation, you experience everything as primordially pure.

We know this, don't we? Isn't it like that? I can't remember, someone was telling me how they just were having a bad morning—this was wrong and that was wrong. And then you notice the mind was clouded with grumpiness, and then every single thought was something else that was wrong. If we're not really watching that, it really is that the whole world becomes a hell realm. And you walk in the dining room the next morning and it's all so beautiful—the sun, the people, they're so lovely. Everything is primordially pure. That must have been a dream yesterday.

Ajahn Chah is wonderful on this. He holds up a vase and says, "Okay, cup. Look at this cup. You might think it's nice or ugly or indifferent. It's just a cup. It's you who are making yourselves insane. A cup doesn't care." And it's like that with anything.

So right at the point of contact, mindfulness wisdom at the point of contact, at the point of perception and vedanā—that's the fount of freedom, the fount of all wisdom. But it's so easy to miss that point of contact and get completely into this concoction, so quick, so fast. And then the mind flips. We wonder why we're confused.

In terms of this craving papañca, Tibetans have a great saying that craving puts feathers on an object. Craving colors our perception. The thing craved looks so much more attractive. And this is really the way the mind moves away from the unpleasant, from craving.

A few weeks ago, I was talking to someone in an interview, and the person was saying, "I'm seeing craving all the time, but I really want to see aversion. I know I have this aversion, and I can't see it. I want to see aversion." I bit my tongue because I could have said a lot of things, but we kept exploring. We'd come to what work they did, and I asked, "Well, how long do you walk?" Somehow that came up. They said, "Well, I walk ten minutes or fifteen minutes." I said, "Oh, really? And then what happens?"

"Well, then I think of something really much more interesting to do, and I go and do it."

"What happened just in that moment before?" I asked.

"Well, I think, you know, the walking's not so great. So I go."

And as we talked, we could see that in many different areas of his life, as soon as just the slightest unpleasantness arose, the mind immediately created something so much more desirable—which could have been anything, but it was desirable—so that the unpleasant wasn't even noticed. Never mind the aversion; just zoom into desire. And whatever whole worlds that particular desire created, whatever concoction or fabrication.

It's fascinating. As we explored together, he thought, "Oh, wow, that's interesting." And then, of course, I

never got to talk to him again. I have no idea if he could keep exploring that or what. But just seeing this—that's exactly the papañca of craving. Exactly what the Buddha was describing: the way the mind avoids the unpleasant and never knows that's what's happening.

So as long as we're seduced by this promise of pleasure, as long as we're seduced by this subtle or not so subtle perception that the difficult, the painful, the grief-stricken, the sad is wrong, bad, a mistake, something to get rid of—as long as we're seduced by the perception of the beautiful being the right way and the other the wrong way—so long we're going to keep being entranced by samsara.

Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche, who is the brother of Mingyur Rinpoche, gave a teaching I heard once—which of course I can't find now. He talked about renunciation as really being what he called weariness with samsara. And by weariness, he didn't mean aversion. When I hear "weariness," my mind goes to aversion, to not liking. But he meant a weariness with samsara that comes from just keep watching the fickleness of vedanā—the untrustworthiness of pleasant, unpleasant, neutral—how quickly it changes, and how quickly our mind is seduced by just a moment of pleasantness into a whole mood, into a whole story of us and other and life and past and future and what's going to happen and how good I'll feel and how will I do it and what will they say and when I get home. All of that from just one moment of pleasant feeling. Or unpleasant feeling. Or neutral feeling.

And somehow, when we're not weary in a moment yet with that, there's that promise of, "Yes, yes, this concoction, this fabrication is really how it is. This is really going to bring me to peace." And then we change.

Andrea Levine, Stephen Levine's wife, wrote about how the mind is so untrustworthy. She described eating chocolate cake and the mind going, "Oh, have another piece. It won't hurt you. It's really tasty. Have another piece of chocolate cake. Be kind to yourself." Then you eat the second piece of cake and the mind goes, "I wouldn't have done that if I were you."

And we keep on believing it. We keep not noticing. Just one concoction after the other.

Ajahn Chah has a lovely way of describing how the mind concocts reality. He says we are determining things into existence in every moment—this concoction, this fabrication. The Buddha talks about the tides of conceiving sweeping over a person, being a source of endless suffering. Ajahn Chah writes: "The tendency to conceive, to make things up in terms of self, is the source of happiness, suffering, birth, old age, sickness, and death. This is the worldly mind spinning around and changing at the directives of worldly conditions."

This is what he means: appearances are determined into existence because they don't intrinsically exist. For example, a simple example—suppose somebody wanted to make a marker. They would take a piece of wood or a rock, place it on the ground, and then call it a marker. Actually, it's not a marker. There isn't any marker. It's just something that we've determined into existence through the use of conventional concepts.

Very helpful when we know this.

In the same way, we determine cities, people, cattle, everything. We determine these things into existence because intrinsically it isn't like that. They aren't these separate things. It's like having an empty dish—you can put anything you like into it because it's empty. This is the nature of determined reality. Men and women are determined concepts, as are all the things around us.

If we know the truth of determinations clearly, we can be at peace. It's not a problem. We know how to use them, but we need to understand them. Good and evil, high and low, black and white—all determinations. The trouble is that mostly we're lost in determinations. That's the truth.

But when we see that everything arises and then ceases—people are born, then they die; bad moods arise and then they cease; good moods arise and then they cease—we begin to understand. As Ajahn Chah asks, have you ever seen anybody cry for three or four whole years without stopping? The most you might cry is a whole night, and then the tears dry up. In their passing is peace. This is really peace—to be calmed of proliferations, calmed of this concocting, calmed of the burden of self.

Because as the Buddha says, even what the world calls self is in fact unsatisfactory. For no matter upon what it constructs its ideas of identity, the fact is ever other than that. The sense of self is a moment-by-moment fabrication based on contact, vedanā, and saññā in any particular moment. And because the actuality is always other than that, as Ajahn Sumedho says, you can't construct a peaceful sense of self. There's no solid sense of self anyway, and whatever we construct is based on reactivity to moods, to saññā, to vedanā. And we wonder why it doesn't really work.

So how do we—we know this, but in terms of this place of vedanā and saññā—how can we begin and continue not constructing? How can we just be so present that construction doesn't need to happen? Again, what I've been noticing the last couple of weeks is how often it starts from that moment of perception of unpleasant or bad or wrong, and that immediate construction to change, to get away, or to go into and blame oneself. That construction, that inability or unwillingness—or not even noticing—to just be completely at ease, at rest, even in the difficult.

As Joko Beck says, can we find in ourselves a willingness to rest in the confusion and unpleasantness? And it's true, sometimes we can find a willingness but not the ability. I want to acknowledge this. We can have some really strong concoction come up—a terror, a mood, an aversion, a sense of self-judgment, or incredible lust. And you sort of know what's there. You can say, "This is incredible lust," but that's as far as you can go with mindfulness. The energy of the kilesa, the energy of that mood, is so much stronger than the energy of mindfulness. This happens once in a while. It might happen to you.

So when you notice that, it's also wisdom to see that at this moment—and this is what we call feeding and starving—you're trying to be mindful of the lust, and it's getting worse and worse, and you're about to act on it. You realize, "Okay, too strong." At this point, you really need to change the channel. You need to back

off. That's not an unwillingness. That doesn't mean you're a hopeless failure in mindfulness and practice. It means with wisdom you see the energy of mindfulness, the strength of it, just doesn't meet the strength of the kilesa at that point. We've got to choose when to be present and what skillful means when it's time to change the channel.

But often it's not that there isn't an ability—there's not a willingness, or even, as I was saying in the beginning, the perception that "this is wrong" is so deep and unquestioned and maybe not even noticed that we're engaging in a huge fabrication to change, to fix, to get away from, and we don't even know it. We don't even know that's what's going on.

Our mind, as quite a few people were saying in the last couple of days—the word rationalization kept coming up over and over. "But I can rationalize this," or "There's a really good rationalization." Yes, our mind can come up with thoughts and constructions and explanations for anything. My God, just listen to politicians—they can explain anything. And when you're listening, you go, "That's a bunch of crap," right? Now, if only we could listen to ourselves in that same way. As soon as I hear my mind going, "Oh, yeah, yeah, that's really good"—okay, thank you very much. What's going on? What's going on? Come back here. Can I find in myself a willingness to rest in the unpleasantness, to just rest in the unpleasantness?

A French writer, Colette, wrote once, "Look for a long time at what pleases you, and for a longer time at what pains you." It's like that as an expression of mindfulness. Mindfulness, a willingness to be aware, isn't hierarchical. And it isn't choosing which things are more worthy of our awareness than another—whether worthy means pleasant, whether worthy means I think I'll learn more if I look at this than if I look at that.

Worthy means this is what's supposed to be happening, that's not what's supposed to be happening. If I look at this thing that I like longer, it'll get better. If I pretend this isn't happening, it'll go away. I don't know why we keep thinking that'll work. Denial is an amazing force—but that's a whole other talk.

Can we find in ourselves a willingness to rest in the unpleasant and the difficult? This is a place, I think, where we encounter the deeply inlaid habit of self-judging that so many people carry. It comes from particular personal circumstances. Each of us who has that can perhaps trace in our biographical history reasons why self-judgment or self-hatred, fear of annihilation, being unloved, abandonment—we each have our personal story with it.

But what I keep exploring in myself is how, on this very basic level, this momentary level of experience, the sense of self-judging and worthlessness pretty much only comes along with something that's happening that's unpleasant, or that I don't think should be happening. When I'm feeling really concentrated or filled with love, when my body doesn't hurt, when there's a sense of stillness—am I judging myself? Not so likely. But when that goes away: Oh, what did I do wrong? And then we start judging, because I was so filled with ego about that good thing, and that's why it went away. I could give you ten million examples. You can all make up your own.

But I've seen how much the sense of self-judging is, again, a sign of not really deeply understanding the first noble truth—the sense that bad stuff isn't supposed to happen. And when it does happen to me, I'm a failure. Getting sick, getting old, getting angry, not being able to concentrate, not being able to do open vipassana, not being able to do whatever your mind made up as the way things are supposed to be happening—not seeing that our mind made it up, trying to make our experience fit. It doesn't fit, and that becomes another sign of failure. Somehow not really clearly seeing, as Chökyi Nyima said, the fickleness of vedana, of perception, of samsara, the constant changing nature—as if anything could stay the same. As if, if we get it right, the sense of self will never arise again. And when you think you've really seen through it and it arises again, that's just further proof that you're hopelessly, hopelessly deluded. You might as well just give it up. We land in there, not really understanding.

All my life—well, since I was old enough to read—I always found myself most deeply inspired by reading or hearing about people who have somehow been present in periods of great suffering, either through big cataclysmic events in the world or in their own lives, and have been able to be present with that, to bear witness to that suffering—their own, others', or both—in a way that is both bearing witness to what's happening and yet ennobling. A way that meets suffering with compassion and understanding, without dehumanizing the people who are suffering, the people who may seem to be creating the suffering, or oneself for being in it.

I remember when I was maybe in high school, I compulsively read all of Alexander Solzhenitsyn's work—all of it. The Gulag Archipelago and all of his novels. Looking back, I actually still have it lying next to my bed. When I try to read it now I think, God, this is horrible stuff. How come I was always wanting to read it? Because it's long, and it's a lot of detail about what went on in Stalin's Russia.

But when I think back, it's the fact that—I mean, he had anger; I'm not saying he was like a bodhisattva—but there's a way he bore witness to his own experience and others' experience that kept finding the humanity and the goodness and the decency in people. For him, going through the horror of being in the labor camps actually woke him up more to the depth of life, to the beauty and the suffering, to what life's all about. Instead of just living on the surface, it opened him to depth of connection—connection with life, with suffering, with compassion, with human beings.

There's a way that suffering—I always forget if it was Buddhadasa or Ajahn Chah who said this—there's suffering that leads to more suffering, and suffering that leads to the end of suffering, depending on how we meet it, how we relate to it.

Somehow this has always touched me so deeply. Solzhenitsyn is just one example. Or Martin Luther King, when you read some of what he said about facing suffering and violence and horror and racism and murder, saying: I refuse to become bitter. I refuse. And he refused to turn his back, refused to make anyone else "the other"—being able to be present and awake with wisdom, with compassion, with a wholeness of presence, in the midst of suffering that you don't even want to watch on television. And he's

living through it.

So many people like that, in big places, in big events in the world. But for each of us, in any moment, that same possibility exists—that this willingness to simply be fully present for whatever it is becomes the opening into the stillness of non-fabrication, the opening into connection with all beings through compassion.

I know for myself I've seen this a million times, on retreat and off retreat—it doesn't matter. But you have to keep rediscovering it. I can't just tell myself; that doesn't work. I have to really rediscover it from my gut, so to speak.

When I'm going through periods where I start to feel alienated, disconnected, alone—just that sense that something's wrong—the more I'm trying to figure it out, the more disconnected, the more alienated I feel. Whether it projects outward and I start perceiving people as being weird or not acting right, or whether it turns around and goes inward with thoughts like "I'm a hopeless failure," whatever way it goes, that just leads to more alienation. I'll say always—this is an always question. I always find that somehow at the root of that is a trying to avoid, to move away from some difficult, painful, unpleasant experience. It could be so-called internal, so-called external; it doesn't matter.

It could be a huge, unpleasant experience of something going on with my family that I feel helpless to help with, that really triggers a fear and an anger, and I don't want to be with the whole thing. So I unplug my phone so I don't get a phone call, just pretend the whole thing isn't happening. Yeah, that really helps.

Or it could just be something I don't even know what. I just sit down or stop walking. Or if I'm driving, just kind of tune in with my eyes open. Just tune in: What's happening? Sometimes it just comes down to a tightness in the chest. It's not even some huge event necessarily, but just some unpleasant, icky feeling. And the mind and heart is concocting a whole fabrication—the whole world is turning into an alienated hell realm—not to feel this. It's not to feel this. You feel and go, "Oh, if I feel this, I'm going to die." That's how it feels.

But you feel it. Not only do you not die, it's like, "Oh, that's just what's happening." The whole concoction stops. Self and other, no problem. Just this-ness. Quite amazing. Quite amazing.

From that, just the willingness to rest in the unpleasant, in the confusing, in the difficult, is the potential for this opening into connection and tenderness with all life that's not based on separation, that's not based on concocting, that's not based on fabrication.

Well, I was going to talk about the other two papañcas—craving being the first—but I think I won't. I'll just mention them. The second source of papañca, the source that feeds the concocting, is our attachment to our views, which I've been alluding to: our views of what's right, of what's wrong, how someone should act, how something should be. You can already get a sense of how far we can go with that. And the third is this māna, conceit, comparing.

We have a couple of minutes, so I'll just give some examples of that, because it's really, really interesting to look at this on retreat, just because you have more time and the mind is a little quieter.

Māna, often translated as "the conceit of self," is in one way really obvious. It's happening a lot; it isn't that subtle. When you start noticing it, you think, "How could I not have seen this?" But on another level, it's really very subtle. In terms of the ten so-called fetters in the Theravada system—the phases of awakening as various torments and confusions are attenuated and released from the mind, so gradually there's less craving, less aversion, not the strong belief in personality—in fact, one of the first fetters that's supposed to be seen through is sakkāya-diṭṭhi, personality belief. That doesn't mean sense of self goes away. Māna, conceit, this subtle sense of self and other, is one of the last ones to be seen through.

And so one of the ways this subtle conceit of "I am" manifests is through a grosser or more subtle comparing of the mind. I'm sure you've noticed your mind comparing once in a while. Just better than, less than, equal to. Start tuning into it—it's a trip. You walk into the dining room. Sometimes when I'm on retreat over at the retreat center, I haven't done it for a long time, and when it's really crowded there, I think of the dining room as hell realm meditation. There's just so much going on.

And when the mind is really quiet, not concocting, not reacting, it's not a hell realm. Let's be clear—the hell is not the dining room. The hell realm is in the mind and heart that's reacting, that's fabricating, this concocting.

But how much of that comparing goes on? It's not all comparing, of course. There's other stuff too, as you all know. But just notice the comparing. How do they eat compared to me? How much do they take? How do they walk? How do they sit? How do they chew? They're better than me. They're worse than me. They're the same as me. They're eating more. They're eating less. They come late. They go early. They're so greedy. I'm so greedy. Who's more greedy? It's just endless.

Who sits longer? Who sits shorter? Who walks longer? Who walks slower? Who's that walking by me? Isn't it remarkable how much you have to look when somebody's walking by you? As if it makes a difference. Has it ever really brought peace to your heart and mind when you looked? It brings the peace of the end of craving, yes—it does bring that peace. But we could have that without satisfying the craving too. That's a big insight. But it generally then adds the un-peace of that person, whoever they are, and whatever particular judgment or comparison the mind makes.

So if it's someone slumping by, making a lot of noise, and you finally look and think, "Oh, it's that person I thought was better than me—and look at them now!" Or someone's going so slowly, and you look: "Oh no, it's that person I thought was the one person worse than me, and they're doing better now." And every time a new person comes, you have to reorganize the whole order you've got everybody in.

Comparing is an endless source of suffering. It's a wonderful source of increasing our sense of worthlessness and self-judgment—it's really good for that. It also, in a twisted way, shows the

interconnectedness of all of us. Because you can't compare without me and you and them and other. You can't compare all by yourself. There has to be something there. Everything anyone else does affects us, in a twisted kind of way.

But anyway, it's a great practice, a great group practice, a great dining room practice to simply notice. Notice when the mind has zoomed out—just as Ajahn Dun said, zoomed out after a mood and created a whole world based on comparing. See if you're still there, if you can just notice the point of sense contact. Did the comparing start with seeing? Can you come back and just be with seeing? See if you notice whether it's pleasant or unpleasant. See if you notice the perception—seeing, "Oh, they're no good." Seeing, "Wow, aren't they doing well." Seeing, "Oh, I'm no good." Just noticing. Seeing the contact, the vedanā, how it feels, the perception.

Not in order to achieve anything special, but simply to explore and to see if it's possible—and it is possible—to, from time to time, come back to this level of immediacy of experience. Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, vedana, perception. Yes, that's happening. Thoughts might come. That's also happening. We don't have to buy into the construction.

And then there's stillness—that stillness of the mind not needing to reference other or self for anything, not needing to reference time, not needing to reference space. No movement to locate, to compare anything. Just the stillness of this right now.

This is the Buddha. He's describing the end of papañca, but he's really just talking about himself: "Thus, bhikkhus, the Tathagata does not conceive of a visible thing as apart from sight. He does not conceive of something unseen. He does not conceive of a thing to be seen. He does not conceive about a seer."

Do you understand? And he goes through all the different senses. He does not conceive of a visible thing as apart from sight—the famous teaching to Bahiya: "In the seeing, there's only the seen." There's no seer seeing something. There's not something else somewhere else to go and be seen. There's not someone seeing. There's no visible thing apart from sight, no audible thing apart from sound. He goes through all of it. "He does not conceive about one who cognizes. Thus, whatever is seen, heard, sensed, or clung to is known as truth by other folk, but amidst those who are entrenched in views, one who is thus, like the Tathagata, holds none of these views as true or false."

You don't need to take a stand on the view at all. And this is the end of papañca—the end of resorting to weapons, quarrels, brawls, disputes, recrimination, malice, and false speech. Here, these harmful, unwholesome states cease without remainder.

The end of papañca, as the Buddha says, is the ending of conflict.

Adyashanti has a quote I like: "Self-referencing is the mind's tendency to locate itself. So when it is realized that there is no self apart from the perceiving, then the tendency to try to find oneself in any experience, insight, or concept ceases. I'm talking about a condition where the mind has no compulsive

need to understand in terms of ideas, concepts, and beliefs. A condition where you are no longer referencing the mind, feelings, or emotions for security in any way."

So let's just sit quietly for a minute. Nisargadatta Maharaj says, "Just sit quietly, free from the obsession with 'what next.' And in the silence, something may be heard which is ordinarily too fine and subtle for perception."

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