Hitting the Wall of Sakkāya-diṭṭhi

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:02:58

Today we had a little teacher meeting after lunch, as we sometimes do, and we were talking about our sense of the flow of the retreat. Of course, everybody's completely different, so in some ways it doesn't really make sense to speak of "the flow of the retreat." But at the same time, we always do that, and there's a sort of sense we pick up on.

The sense we had, which really matched what I've been feeling the last couple of days, is what we're calling the sine wave. If you look at everybody, there's a sense that people's practices are going up and down—different people at different places, each of you at changing places, and at any one time all in different places. The sine wave describes those periods when you're having insight, when it's flowing, when there's not much velcro and nothing is sticking. It's really quite tender, or the mettā is flowing—just no problem. You really understand, you're seeing, "Oh, these are the patterns," and you see they're patterns, and they come and go, and you really know that. The anicca that Andrea was talking about—you're really seeing, "Yeah, that's really how it is."

And then in the trough of the sine wave—which is equal, because you need both, that's the thing—we're watching it slowly deteriorate with full awareness. You can really see how a little thought came in and it was a little stickier, even though it was the same thought. A kind of mood came in, and this pattern which you've seen a million times, and you know it's not really... you know it's just a pattern, and yet... just a little bit, but not quite. You watch it go down to the trough and all of a sudden it's stuck. It's solid. We really believe it. And we get riddled with either frustration or doubt or fear. It's what I call hitting a wall—not just a little bit of a hard time, but a big-time wall. We all have that. We all hit the wall.

That's what I want to talk about tonight: that place where we really lose our trust, if not our motivation, not our commitment. There's this really deep believing of whatever personality view arises—really, that's all that's happening in that moment. But it's the personality thing that we bottom-line place our faith in, and it's come back. We're riddled with frustration, with doubt, even though we've seen it more, seen it coming in, can actually describe the causes and conditions, how it starts, what triggers it, how it comes in. We're seeing that we're in it, but somewhere deep in there, it's not okay. And not that it should be okay—that's part of believing it, that it's not okay.

When this happens to someone who's been practicing quite a bit—not just new practitioners, and none of you are new practitioners—these are things that happen over and over to all of us as part of our path. The crests and troughs of the sine wave are equally valid parts of the path. There's no such thing as only up and no down. The down isn't some kind of mistake to get rid of so we can have just ups. They're equally

the path.

I want to talk a little bit about the different ways we hit the wall. Hitting the wall isn't just "Ah, I'm so sick of this." Hitting the wall is "I can't do this anymore"—or more like "I won't do this anymore." And I don't mean just a mood, a little five-minute mood. We all have those. I mean a deep level of despair or doubt, where your motivation drops out or whatever.

What's really going on—and this goes on the whole path—is that our views are being challenged. This came up a lot this morning. Our personality views, the views that Winnie talked about the other night about what we want to happen, but even more, subtly held views about what is and is not the path, what is and is not supposed to be our practice—views we don't even know we have.

It's hard. It's hard for everybody. No one doesn't experience this sometimes, because that's how it is. In those times when it's free and open and we really know—even if it's for a tenth of a second—we really know it doesn't matter what's happening. Absolutely no exceptions. It doesn't matter. There's consciousness, awareness, and things happening, and that is it. We really know that.

And then in this trough, it's like you thought you knew it. You can't get there, and this really is... use your own words for what it is for you. But it's something to really consciously bring in a little bit more.

When our views are being challenged, first know that it's a paradox: no thought, no view can adequately hold or describe reality. It can't. Impossible. And yet our main tool is thoughts and views. As Andrea was saying this morning, we use views. No one's saying we don't use views. It's the attachment to them, the belief in a view that we don't even know is defining our world—that when it gets challenged, it just sends us around the bend.

And the main one—I don't want to talk about views too extensively, but the main one I want to refer to, of course, is *sakaya-ditti*. *Ditti* means view. *Sakaya-ditti* is translated as identity view, personality view. This is the kind of big view that gets us attached to all the other views we become attached to, kind of in service of our identity view, our personality view.

When it's talked about in the suttas, in reference to so-called stream entry, they say the eye of the Dhamma is awoken in her or in him. One of the things that's seen through is *sakaya-ditti*, personality view. Seen through. It doesn't mean it stops arising. Seen through. Not completely held to and believed without exception anymore.

I want to give a very brief description of it. Sally is going to talk more about the five aggregates, which is really at the core of it, in another talk. But identity view—Sayadaw U Lakana, a Burmese teacher Andrea and I were teaching with last month, defines *sakaya* as the stream of mental and physical experience, or the mind and matter flux. He kept saying that this time: the mind and matter flux. I love that. Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, mental experience. Just these things happening over and over and over. That's all that's happening. And we're making these huge stories about it. That's all that's happening.

Those times when the natural phases of life, the natural phases of practice—expansion, contraction, expansion, contraction, the day and the night, the tides, the weather—that's just how life is. In the so-called expansion phase, there's spaciousness, non-clinging, no problem. Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, thinking—it's coming, it's going, it's pleasant, it's unpleasant, whatever it is, that's fine. No problem.

Then in the so-called contraction, *sakaya-ditti* arises in any moment when any particular seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, mental experience, emotion, thought, feeling tone—whatever—is clung to, is identified as being either me or mine. In that moment, identity view is born. And that can be quick, or mostly what happens is this: there's a sense of being out walking. There's smells, sounds, the sensation of the breeze. There's pleasant or unpleasant. It's just whatever. It can be very finely noticed or more broadly noticed—that's not to the point. Things are just coming and going. You're walking. It's whatever it is.

And suddenly, the coolness of the breeze is felt as unpleasant. Maybe noticed, maybe not. And there's a sense: unpleasant. *I'm cold.* Right then, identity view is born. My unpleasantness, my cheek, I'm cold. This experience of cold is happening to *me*.

Well, that doesn't have to be a big deal. We can just see that. But generally, it doesn't stop there. It goes on. I'm cold, and I need to do something, and why is it like this, and blah, blah, blah. And then the whole propensity of thoughts and emotions, the whole story of me, arises out of that moment. You can see that happening sometimes.

But that's just what happens. It's okay. We can just notice that. That's part of the expansion-contraction. Expand, expand, expand. Whatever it is. And it's always something different, but we neglect to notice that.

Expansion, contraction—that's what identity view is. And we can just watch it happen. It doesn't have to be a problem.

But when it becomes a problem, identity view, personality view—I'm using these terms a little bit differently now. It's exactly the same thing, but I'm going to talk about personality view in the way that Ajahn Sumedho discusses it. We're moving from that moment when there's just a contraction of clinging around unpleasant sensation or pleasant thought—oh, it's almost lunchtime, pleasant thought. I'm hungry, I need to go eat. And then the whole story that gets created: "Oh, I'm hungry again. What's the matter with me? I'm so greedy. All I ever do is eat, and I should try to renounce." All of this stuff, all your history, all of that—that's what I'm going to call personality view. "I'm this person who has these patterns around food, and I always do, and here I am again, and everybody's watching me." All of that stuff—personality view.

So it's with any particular moment where there's clinging, there's grasping at any of the sixth sense door experiences, and then it leads to thoughts and emotions, what we call our personality. Now, this is in our common parlance, not so much the Buddha's way of speaking. It would be that the more habitual patterns and emotions and reactions come up. I mean, I think I'm assuming, but most of us, if you were asked,

"What's your personality like?" we could pull out a few threads of particular patterns that come up a lot. Yes? You can think of a couple. I don't have to say them, but we could think of a couple. They may be nice ones. They may be not nice ones. That's not the point. It's not about good or bad.

And then we think, "That's me. That's my personality." And we believe that deeply on some level. And when the sine wave goes down into the trough, when something's unpleasant and something's identified with, the sense of identity view is there—the particular patterns and thoughts and emotions that get triggered, that catch us, are usually one of these familiar strands that we would pull out, that we're familiar with.

Generally, it's not going to be "Oh yes, all is as best as it can be in this best of all possible worlds," and we're lost in frustration. Probably not the identity view we pull out at that time. It's more like, "I can't do this. I'm hopeless. I knew I was hopeless. And I had this good time before out of the grace of God, but now it's gone, and now this is what I really know."

And I'm saying it like it's sort of funny, but we know it's not the least bit funny when it's happening. Even when you can describe that it's happening, and you know it's happening, and you're watching it happen, and you can be aware that it's happening—but it's still really me it's happening to, isn't it? And it's hard.

This is where Ajahn Sumedho says something that I think has really been interesting and helpful to me. He was talking about teaching Westerners—because he practiced in Thailand, he teaches a lot of Thai people—but he was just talking about working with Westerners, American and European culture. He said that for him, he sees self-doubt as one of the biggest hindrances for Westerners in our practice. Self-doubt about our insights. Self-doubt about the insights and experiences of awareness and the liberating nature of insights that we've all experienced, the liberating nature of awareness that we've all experienced.

And he said he thinks—this is his opinion—but he thinks in part we're so prone to this, so really riddled by this self-doubt, and it takes such a grip of us because, in Western culture, our personalities are so strong. Our belief in and our reliance on our personalities is so strong. It's almost like that's really our bottom line belief system. That's where we go for refuge—the kind of steadiness of our personality. Even if we might hate our personality. We're totally practicing to change our personality. Really, bottom line, isn't it? But it's all about the personality. And when the going gets tough and we're caught back in really believing the personality, there's some way that's almost our refuge, he's saying. That's what we get caught in.

That's the belief system. That's the sakāya-diṭṭhi on a really deep level, where we can talk a good line, but somewhere in there we're so caught in believing it. And so he says we just keep getting tricked back into this sakāya-diṭṭhi, this belief.

This is the place of reference from which we'd be, what I say, hitting the wall. It's not the experience that's happening that makes us hit the wall. It's that reference point of sakāya-diṭṭhi—"this is happening to me, I'm doing this, I'm not doing this, I can't do this," whatever.

We all keep saying this all the time, but just noticing that. So many people have talked about and experienced just moments—not even experience—of such profound tenderness, sensitivity, or ease, or relaxation, or quiet, or all kinds of things going on, but it's just no problem. Just seeing what's happening. Even seeing the personality patterns come and just seeing them and going, "Yeah, look at that. I see how the causes bring it about, I see the effects, it goes, no problem."

And then when we get somehow really caught, you can see it coming in because there's a lot of awareness. You can see: "Oh, this thing triggered, and this thing triggered, and my energy was low, and my back was hurting, and there was a little bit of aversion, and I was a little tired, and I didn't quite notice this thought and that thought and that thought, and the next thing I knew—boom." It's like you can make the whole recipe, and we can see it.

And that even undercuts our trust more, because we believe so strongly in personality that if I see it, that means I should be able to stop it. I'm in control here. Not. So we then don't believe, we don't trust the wisdom from the tenderness, from the spaciousness, from whatever it is. It could be any experience—there's no particular experience I'm calling good and another one I'm calling bad. But the times when the Velcro's not so strong, that one isn't about our personality view, and we don't trust it.

That's what Sāmedo's saying. We get caught back into believing in our personality, really believing in it. And it gets more and more subtle, and there's no way we can describe or have a view that encompasses the breadth of our path. What should happen? What shouldn't happen? Everything's going to happen. And all of it's the path. And it's completely different for each one of us. Yes, there's movements we can see, there's patterns, but the particulars are completely different for everybody.

So there's nothing to really compare it to, to prove how useless you are. What's happening is all that could be happening. There's no way it can be outside of our path. But our personality view is not a reference point from which we can see that or trust it. So that's so limiting.

This is from a book about a Thai woman in the last century who was apparently greatly realized. Mei-Chi Cao was her name. She said, "Everything that makes a person unique changes continually and eventually disintegrates. Each personality is constantly ceasing to be what it was and becoming something new. Constantly. Those factors one tends to conceive of as self are impermanent and fleeting. Everything about bodily form and the mind's thoughts and feelings is without intrinsic stability and bound to dissolve."

Just what Andrea was saying last night. But even if within our moment-to-moment thinking and thoughts and emotions and personality we can see the constant shift—we can see that, we know it—there's a way that views, when we don't see them, we see the inner change. But the big view is that's all changing, yet the big picture is it's all coming back to that same self-judgment, which is my bottom-line core pattern, or whatever it is.

And it's something Luang Por Jamnian said once. He said, "Only two things are not impermanent: nibbāna

and a concept." You get it? Because a concept freezes. The concept solidifies what the concept is of and doesn't let it change. So our concept of our personality does that.

So notice when the sakāya-diṭṭhi comes in, when it's just starting or when it's strong. Notice when it's not there. And notice, as Buddhadāsa said, "The sense of self is simply a condition that arises when there's grasping and clinging in the mind." That's all.

It's just another arising appearance. There's grasping and clinging—boom, sense of self. Fine. That's the effect of grasping, so what? The grasping and clinging goes away, the sense of self goes away. A hundred million times a day, so what? We breathe so many times a day, fine. Coming and going. But we make this big commotion because of this kind of belief in our personality.

So I just wanted to talk then about a couple of examples of hitting the wall. As I said, you can all come up with your own. And again, it's not just that it's hard, but when we really somehow feel so discouraged, we're losing our motivation and really believe "I can't do it."

That's one of the big ones, the first one: "I had it, but now it's gone. I knew how to do it, but it's gone. It just proves I can't do this. I really can't do it." That's what vicikicchā is talking about—self-doubt.

There's a sutta from the time of the Buddha that I really like because it points to something quite profound, about a man named Assaji, a monk, a well-realized monk who was very ill, probably dying. The Buddha comes to him and asks him a series of questions, but the gist is that he's saying, "I hope you are not troubled by remorse and regret," as he's dying. "I hope your mind and heart is clear."

And Assaji says, "I actually have quite a lot of remorse and regret."

The Buddha says, "Is it about your virtue? Something you've done?"

"Oh no, it's not that."

"Then why are you troubled if you have nothing to reproach yourself for in regard to virtue?"

And Assaji says, "Well, formerly, Venerable Sir, when I was ill, I was able to keep on tranquilizing the bodily formations"—in other words, he could get calm and concentrated—"but now I cannot obtain concentration." The man is dying, and this is what he's upset about. "And as I do not obtain concentration, it occurs to me, 'Let me not fall away.'" He's really afraid. He's falling away from the path because he can't get concentrated while he's dying.

You can relate, can't you? It's really quite something. And when our personality views are turned towards what's happening in our practice—which is what starts to happen here—it's magnified. It's like, "Oh my God, this is the most important thing to me and I can't do it. This is proof I can't do it. What am I going to do?" So it's huge. And he's dying, so add that on top of it—your last moments and you can't do it and there's no other chance.

Of course the Buddha says, "Assaji, those ascetics, those Brahmins who regard concentration as the essence and who identify concentration with asceticism, with the path—failing to obtain concentration, they might think, 'Let us not fall away.' What do you think, Assaji? Haven't I told you? Is form permanent or impermanent?"

"Impermanent."

"Therefore, seeing this, one understands this cannot be relied upon. There's no more of this."

And he goes through all the aggregates—form, which is the body, pleasant feeling, perception, consciousness, mental formation. They're all impermanent. You can't rely on any of them. He's basically saying, "Okay, so you can't concentrate. That's just a mental formation that comes and goes based on conditions. It doesn't mean you are falling away from the path. It just means conditions have changed right now."

We don't always have the Buddha to come and remind us. But the fact that even at that point, a monk who had been practicing with the Buddha and had a lot of understanding could still fall into that when he was close to death—it just shows how deep this pattern can be. It's not a small thing to keep deeply running into the identification and the power that this identification can have with our deeply habituated self-doubts, fears, and pains. You don't just see it a couple of times and you're done. It's going to keep on showing up in different ways.

That's not something you're doing wrong. It is the path.

So that's one way we hit the wall: I can't do it, and I could before.

Sometimes, again as I was saying, we've seen our patterns, our really suffering patterns, quite a bit. We're quite familiar with them. And they come again. And as I was just saying, we see the whole thing. You can label the whole thing. But not only is it happening, it's happening with awareness. And so not only do we feel the pain of it, we feel the pain of knowing that I shouldn't be doing this anymore. I've seen it enough. So we add the pain of humiliation. And we add the pain of "I can't do it properly." And it's just, I don't even want to look at this anymore. I can't face this another moment—as if there was anywhere to go, and there's not.

So that's really the despair, because if you walk out of here, it's walking out with you. But there's this sense of, I can't look at it anymore. And there are times, of course, when everything—the fear or the pain or the frustration, whatever—is, as we say, overwhelming, stronger than the mindfulness and its skillful means to change the channel, to do metta or brighten the mind or take a walk. I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about on such a deep level, it's hopeless. I just can't do it anymore—like hitting a wall.

This is where patience comes in. The three types of transcendent patience: patience when wronged, patience to bear hardships for the Dhamma, and patience to keep meeting the profound truth without

giving in to fear. The profound truth doesn't always look beautiful and lovely. The profound truth could be plumbing the depths of your despair in a particular moment as well.

Another place we hit the wall is sometimes it's just an intimation. It isn't obvious. You're not recognizing what the pattern is. But things have been going well, and then it changes. Okay, this happens all the time. And usually a lot of thinking starts. Things get really scattered. You get really confused. You don't know what's going on. And you know you didn't do anything different. I like to call that a transition time, when usually something is about to come up. We never know what. It's usually something we'd rather not know about. But sometimes it's just this intimation of either a pattern or a fear or a grief—just something about ourselves. We don't really know what it is, but the habit of our life has been to keep it down. The habit of our life has been around denial of this, which may have been skillful at the time. It's nothing about skillful or not, but for now, that's not needed. But the habit of denial, the habit of "I don't want to feel this, I don't want to be it," is so strong that all kinds of behaviors have been promulgated over our life to basically distract the mind from feeling this thing.

And so when it comes up—and it could be some kind of primal fear, it could be some deep loneliness, it doesn't necessarily have to be a traumatic memory, it could be, but it doesn't have to be that at all—it's just something that our so-called personality patterns have been built around. I don't want to have to feel that. And for me, I noticed the thought was, "I'll die if I have to feel that." That's as if. And then all these basically stupid, not very nice behaviors to keep myself from having to feel it. You get into all kinds of arguments with people and running away from things and doing this and doing that and creating all kinds of complications in one's life—not to feel a feeling, which when I actually feel it, it's like, oh, well, that's really intense. Okay, I can feel that. It's like a huge relief.

But anyway, when it's just there and we don't know what it is—the mind doesn't know and we don't have any kind of clear intellectual understanding—the sense is, "I'm out of here. I'm so out of here. There's no way I want to get anywhere near this." And we can't even quite say it clearly.

Or something really difficult comes up and we know it, but that personality view arises: "I can't. I just can't be with this"—which is the old belief system. "I can't. There's no way." And it's almost as if at that point, the sense of our limitations, our personality limitations, are so strong. "Well, I just can't do that. There's no way I could meet that." You know, that sense of the box that we make for ourselves out of our sense of ourself. "Well, I just can't."

And we don't almost have the courage to really own our aspirations, to really own our motivation, to really say, "You know what? I can. I don't know how or when or how it's going to show up, but I can come back and be here for it." Almost like sometimes we're afraid to really consciously acknowledge to ourselves the power of our motivation and commitment, because then what if we've really acknowledged we're going forward with everything we have and we still fail? So almost better not to try. I mean, it isn't better not to try, but this is the story. Better just not to really open to it, because I know I can't do it

anyway. So why even beat my head against the wall? And I know. So let's just keep on kind of practicing around the edges. And it's pretty good, and it's good enough.

And that's actually another place—"it's good enough." Sayadaw U Pandita called this "stopping within." He would always say, don't stop without—like it's too hard, we want to give up—and don't stop within, which means, "Okay, it's pretty nice now."

And many of us, when we first come to practice, of course we have no clue what we're getting into, because who would if you knew? But we want somehow to be happier, more at ease. That's normal. And so not even knowing the vastness perhaps of what we're getting into, of course our motivation is going to be somewhat limited. That's normal. And it might be some personality thing, some sense of ease, some particular suffering goes away, whatever. And it may be that that actually happens. Life gets easier. Or you understand something. Or it's just enough equanimity. It's mellow enough. "I can deal now." And the motivation just drops out. Okay, stopping within.

And that can be on many levels. That can be just "it's good enough for now. I'm not suffering too much." I spent years like that. "Oh, I'm equanimous. Things are equanimous. I'm kind of practicing"—but not really with that complete abandon, so to speak. But of course, luckily, something always happens to prick the bubble if you're just somewhat awake.

And so the stopping within can be all the way up to really deep levels of absorption and really strong insights. And I think James referred to that in his talk, where the Buddha said one thing he never lost sight of was never to be satisfied with less than complete liberation of heart and mind. And so we may not know—we may think we have complete liberation of heart and mind—but all we have to do is just keep noticing, just keep being honest, just keep being aware. And that's what we would do anyway. Liberated or not liberated, that's what we're going to keep doing. And if we keep doing it, sooner or later, if it ever happens that greed or aversion or confusion arises again in your mind, you'll notice it.

And then, great. You're noticing it. You're happy to notice it. We keep on paying attention. So that's stopping within.

One last thing I want to mention—I don't think I can quite explain it. It's sometimes what I've called, using Chögyam Trungpa's phrase, "nostalgia for samsara." It's not when we're in deep, deep difficulty, but rather as practice is going along and you're really quite deep in the practice, no longer feeling the sense of struggle so much. There are periods where you just start to feel the possibility, opening to moments when that personality view isn't really so operative.

And even though the moment in itself is just what it is—peaceful or joyful or whatever, it doesn't matter—when we kind of come back a little into the personality, there can often be this sense of, "Oh, but what about..." All kinds of projections arise. "I don't know if I want liberation if it means I have to give up my family." We didn't have a family, so now I have to give up my family? Or I can't be in a committed

relationship, like someone said today. Or it means I can't appreciate art anymore. I can't be creative. Or I'll never like chocolate again. That's kind of silly, but it's there—this "Oh no, I don't want it."

It's just our mind making stuff up and projecting it. And then it's like, "I want to go back to the pleasure garden. I don't want to renounce this stuff. I don't want to give up this stuff, and you can't make me." Nostalgia for samsara is just all the dull grayness.

I've found in myself, often in different periods in my life, it's almost like a grief, like a mourning. It really feels like that for some—I couldn't even say what—but some aspect of my personality that feels so familiar. It doesn't even go anywhere, that's the thing. But it feels like something, some attachment to it, is dying. Some deep belief is getting less. And it's almost like an old, comfortable cloak, and we just want to hold on to it, even though it's ratty and moldy and stinky. "No, it's just so comfortable." It's almost like a mourning of something. There are times I've really felt that. That's okay. Mourning is like this. Just that nostalgia for samsara—don't want to let it go, even when we don't like it.

People often say they see they're in a deep suffering pattern. They recognize it. They can name it. But there's just some little piece that's like, "But still, who would I be without this?" Sometimes it's really bizarre how we're holding on. So we just notice all these ways.

The last one I want to mention is one we've already spoken about in some of the impermanence talk as well. It's the kind of fear that comes up after an insight into "there is nowhere to land, everything's changing, there is no self"—whatever form it takes. Sometimes that's very liberating, and sometimes fear comes up with it, and sometimes we get lost in the fear. But mostly people hear that and think, "Well, that's the one I want. I want to have that kind of fear." But that can stop us too—if we start thinking about it, with all the projections of annihilation.

And the other one, in terms of practice, is when we have an idea of choiceless awareness, when it's just things coming and going, that openness I was talking about—seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching. It's very nice, or it's fast, or whatever, but there's a way we think, "Oh, now this is what it is. This is how things are. Everything's just coming and going and there's no me, and now I know how it is."

And it's going to stay this way. And then it doesn't stay that way. It gets completely chaotic. You think, well, this isn't choiceless. This isn't how it is. It's chaos. It's not supposed to be chaos. It's supposed to be orderly, flowing smoothly. Or else really concentrated. Not stuff all over the place in chaos. And I can't tell what's happening. This can't be right. I can't do it. And we're back there again.

But that's the other thing I like to say: *saṃsāra* is messy. It's not going to get all neat and tidy because we meditate. You just see how chaotic things are. In terms of a reference point of me, we never know what's going to happen. That's what Andrea was saying—it never stays the same, ever. Doing your practice right doesn't mean now stuff stays the same. It doesn't mean even the patterns stay the same. Constant flux, expanding, contraction.

And so it's so hard sometimes. Freedom from clinging, which is really the seed of freedom—freedom from clinging is uncompromising. It's not freedom from clinging to most things, but a few things kind of can stay familiar. Freedom from clinging is completely uncompromising, and we can't imagine what it's like because we can only imagine what we already know. You know, Krishnamurti's famous phrase: freedom from the known. Or the Buddha saying, in terms of a sense of self, it's always unsatisfactory because whatever way you conceive of it, the fact is always other than that. Whatever way we conceive of our sense of self, the fact is always other than that.

But we keep on, this personality wanting to land somewhere and falling into this, hitting this wall—me hitting the wall. I just don't know.

Enlightenment is not a self-improvement project. Nothing about non-clinging confirms and justifies and props up the sense of me or my personality. And we can't imagine from the view of our personality what that's like. And so when we're in that hitting the wall, knowing that that sense of personality is always the reference point when we're feeling we're hitting the wall like that—we're looking at what's wrong, what's wrong. Nothing's wrong. We're just evaluating it from some standpoint that's completely unreliable. But it's so familiar at times, and subtle. That's what Sayadaw says—we're so caught back into it, we don't recognize it.

Stephen Batchelor, I love the way he says things. He says emptiness is not just an experience of oceanic bliss. It is a falling apart of all of our strategies of self-interest, self-centeredness, and seeming protection. And although freeing, this falling apart of all our strategies evokes great disconcertion, dis-ease sometimes—like being in a no man's land without reference points.

And here in practice, all our strategies, our personality patterns of self-interest, of self-centeredness, of seeming protection—these are coming into play around mostly your actual meditation practice. And we can easily tend to overlook that that's what's happening and get so focused on how we're practicing and what we're doing and what's arising. We forget to say, oh, right—I can't trust any view I have about what should be happening and what I can do and what's right, when I'm caught. I don't mean we can't use skillful means. Of course we can. But that's not with this view of: if I do this, then it's going to be like that. If I do this, I'll get rid of this frustration. If I do this, it'll get back to openness. You can feel it—it's not the words, it's the energy in the mind from wanting, from aversion, from it's all about me getting it together. Unreliable.

We can't trust any idea we have of skillful means when the motivation is greed, aversion, or me, me, me. We just can't see clearly. That's all.

But this is hard for us—that our strategies all fall apart. And still, we somehow have to find the motivation, find the trust, find the commitment to keep on opening with total commitment into this next moment of the unknown. And it *is* unknown. As much as we up here talk about the way and the path and the way it can go, and all the things we read—that can support us, that can be information. But again, it's completely

different in each moment for each of us. And all we can do is say, how can I summon up the courage, really like undaunted courage, to open again into this moment with total commitment?

And sometimes it's the one thing we think we don't ever want to be with, the thing we're practicing not to ever have to be with, that is the thing we have to open into. Because that's what's happening. That's our path at this moment.

Maybe a lot of you saw that movie, *Touching the Void*. It was a recreation of something that happened maybe twenty years ago—two friends who were mountain climbing, really high mountains in the Andes in South America. They were coming down together, roped to each other, and they kind of slide, and one of them falls over the edge, hanging over this huge void. The other guy's trying to pull him up for hours, can't pull him up. He's getting slowly, slowly dragged over to the edge himself. And so at some point he made the decision, and he cut the rope.

The guy who cut the rope went over and looked down—his friend had fallen into a deep crevasse. There was no way he could get to him. So the guy who cut the rope went on back.

Then what happened? The guy's in the crevasse, this big, big hole in the ice. It looked as if it was the Himalayas—that level of mountain climbing. He's in this deep crevasse, and he'd broken his leg, so he's in a lot of pain. He's on a little ledge, and it keeps going down, and he's on this ledge for hours—twelve hours, twenty-four, I can't remember. He can't get back up. No way he can get back up. And he's just there. No water, no food. Broken leg.

And he said, after twelve or twenty-four hours, "What do I do? I've got to do something." He said he had such a deep, primal fear of going down deeper into that crevasse. He just could not imagine ever doing it. But he said, at the same time, "I can't just abdicate. I have to do something." And the only thing he could do was with his rope—kind of secure it and lower himself deeper into the crevasse.

So he did that. No idea if it was just going to go on forever, if he was lowering himself into the thing he feared even more than the position he was in now. And he did it. He said, "I can't abdicate."

And as it turned out, he went down and he hit ground and he could kind of go up a slope. Remember, he has a broken leg. He's had no food or water for like twenty-four hours. It's an amazing story. It takes him two or three days to drag himself over boulders and through horrible terrain. He's completely out of it, hallucinatory by the end. But he just barely manages to make it back before he dies. And his friend had been waiting four days, never thought he was alive, and was just about to leave.

It's really an intense movie, but it really happened. And they have the two guys who did it kind of talking too. But that sense of—you know, the most scary, self-perpetuating experience. Sometimes it's like that. Do we just open into it, or do we just freeze on the crevasse?

And I just want to say: nobody here is freezing on the ledge, because you're still here. And awareness is

going. You're not creating awareness. Mindfulness is happening. You're noticing what's happening. You don't have to fix it. You just have to keep being willing to be awake. Everything else is doing itself.

But sometimes that being willing to stay awake is really, really hard. And so we have to find—how do we find that? I don't advocate giving up. We find that way to really make that commitment. And then—and I'm not trying to be discouraging, I'm trying to just be straight—over and over we need to do that. It's not just once. And it's about all different kinds of things.

Even Ajahn Sumedho, who talks so much about having trust and confidence in awareness—that's kind of his thing, he's always talking about it—we were meeting with him, some of the teachers, a couple of years ago. And he was describing a period some years ago at Amaravati, where he's the abbot, where it was an extremely difficult time between all the sangha members—the nuns and the monks and him. And a lot of it, because he was the head and making decisions, he was getting a lot of blame, a lot of criticism. And he said, "My personality hates that. I hate being blamed and criticized." He was just shrinking and fearing it, doing what he needed to do, but a little bit getting caught in it.

And he's always talking about, as I said, having confidence in awareness. And he said—this really went in for me, I don't know if it will communicate to you—he said at some point through this whole process, which went on for weeks and weeks, he realized something. He said, "I just made a determination, an absolute determination, that my confidence is in awareness, not in my personality."

And he knows this and has been talking about it for years. But at this point, in a really heavy time, he called up all his clarity, all his clear intentions, saying, "My confidence is in awareness, not in my personality." Just reminding oneself. We have to keep reminding ourselves. It doesn't go on automatic pilot. And I don't know, somehow that really inspired me.

And so, as I said, I don't mean to be discouraging. It's like the expansion-contraction. We come to a place where we have to lower ourselves into the crevasse. We find that commitment to just open into this next unknown, just wholeheartedly, and let it be what it is. It might be fine for a while, the regular ups and downs. Then we come to another one. But it's not the same us coming to the same place.

Because what I've found in this practice is it keeps going. It may even be harder as we keep going. We're hitting into more difficult stuff that we haven't been able to see before. But it's met with a deeper faith because there's a deeper wisdom, a deeper understanding. Sort of like people say, "I keep coming to seeing these same things I've seen before, but in a different way." It's kind of spiraling deeper and deeper.

I don't know if this helps, but to me, this is kind of like an allegory that helped. A couple of years ago I had the flu for a few weeks, and all I could do was just lie around on my couch, so I was watching a lot of videos. And I ended up watching the Lord of the Rings trilogy again, just all three of them. I'm sure most of you are familiar with it. But what I was so struck by, more than before, was what an allegory Frodo's journey is for our spiritual path, for our practice—how it keeps spiraling deeper and deeper.

So I'm just going to go into it a little bit, if you'll let me. And what are you going to do?

So, in the beginning when Frodo has to take that ring of power and Gandalf the wizard comes and tells him he has to go outside of the little hobbit town he lives in and go to Bree—he's doing that on bright faith, what you'd call bright faith, because he trusts Gandalf.

He doesn't have a clue what's going on in the world, or really what the danger is, or anything. But Gandalf tells him this, and he trusts Gandalf. He thinks it'll be an adventure going outside of Hobbiton. He goes with his friends.

And before he even gets to the little town of Bree, he's already run into danger like he never even knew existed in the world—in his safe little world. These black riders are coming and trying to get them. And they finally get to this place, and he's like, "Oh my God, that was a huge adventure. But finally I can hand this thing off to Gandalf, and I'm done." Right?

And of course, he gets there and Gandalf has disappeared. And he has no clue what to do. There's danger all around. And he has to make the decision to trust some weird guy—he doesn't know who he is. And he does some things that are stupid, and the guy is threatening him, and they almost get killed that night. And finally the guy, Aragorn, says, "Okay, you have to come with me. We have to go to the elves."

So they go out again, and they're really being pursued this time. It's really dangerous, and they're having to actually fight. These little hobbit guys—they never fought. And they're having to actually fight with swords against these huge black wraiths that can't be killed. And Frodo is stabbed. He almost dies. And it's more than he ever could have imagined that he could ever live through or do. And somehow, really almost having no choice, just getting carried along. And finally Aragorn gets them to the elves, and they're in a place of more beauty—like a deva realm—than he never expected, never thought was in the world.

At this point, good and evil are so obvious. The elves are so beautiful. Rivendell is so beautiful. The black riders are so evil—the horses are all foaming. It's pretty clear who's good and who's bad, so far.

So he gets to the elves and he's like, "Oh, I've done the hero's journey more than I could ever do. And now I'm in this more beautiful place." And he meets his uncle, who he thought was dead, and all this stuff. And then it turns out it's just beginning. It's just beginning. And this ring has to be carried to the land of evil to be destroyed. And it turns out he's the one who has to do it. And he has to volunteer to do it. No one tells him he's the one to do it—it becomes really clear.

So at this point, he has a bit more wisdom as to the importance of good and the importance of what he's doing, and also of the threats facing him. So he has more courage than he ever had in the beginning to stand up and say, "Okay, you guys are all arguing. I see I have to do it." Still not really having a clue, but a little more sense that this isn't just a lark.

And then the seven guys come—they're all going to help him, go together. So you have a sense of

togetherness. And right away, the leader disappears—Gandalf. And they go through all kinds of more and more difficult stuff until finally one of the company turns on Frodo. And he sees he can't even trust the company he's with. And then he has to make the decision to go completely by himself, off across the river into this land of Mordor—this little guy, no clue what he's doing. But he knows enough now to be scared to death and to know he has no clue. And he's exhausted. He can't trust anyone.

But his faithful companion comes with him, so they go. And it just keeps going from bad to worse. Every day, once they're in Mordor, he has to keep making the decision. They get up off the rocks and the steam, with that slimy Gollum following. How to keep going? It's not a one-time decision, and each time it's harder, but the stakes are higher.

Somewhere along the way it becomes so clear—he really gets it—that he's never going to live through this. At some point it starts becoming clear that the only way he can keep going is because his motivation has shifted to really caring for the world. It's no longer about being the hero or having a lark or not letting down his friends. He's really seeing that for some reason this is where he is, and he has to do this for all beings, basically.

And at the same time as he's going, the evil outside and all the good stop being so separate. The difficulty starts turning inward on him, and after a while it starts eating away at him from the inside. So there's no longer this separation of the evil out there and the good ones going to do this thing. It's turning in, and the ring is taking over, and he can't see clearly. He turns on his friend, believes the lying voice of Gollum, and is just barely dragging himself up there.

But the only way forward—the harder it gets, the deeper he has to go into his own experience of confusion and delusion and evil and anger and fear. Yet there's still a deeper faith and wisdom that keeps him going, keeps him going, even when he knows he's going to die.

And then even at the very end, when he's going to throw it in, he can't do it all by himself. It really isn't about him doing it by himself. He kept sparing this creature Gollum when his companion wanted to get rid of him, when everyone else wanted to get rid of him. He kept sparing him. And Gollum turned on him and almost had him killed. But at the end, if it hadn't been for that creature coming and trying to take the ring and biting off his finger, he never would have been able to let go.

So you never know. The unknown—you never know.

I just loved that sense of how the deeper you go, the more you see you never had a clue when you started. And it gets harder and harder, more and more touching us internally. It takes so much more courage. But the courage is there because the faith is stronger, because the wisdom is deeper. That's how our practice keeps going. Our life keeps going like that. And for each of us, it's going to take a different turn. We never know which turn is around the corner for us—how to keep finding the wisdom, the courage, the humility.

Just remember that it's different for everyone, and it's hard for everyone. Buddhadasa likes to talk about

Nibbana for everyone. But it's hard for everyone. When we get too lost in hitting our own wall, just widen your gaze a little and realize this is just this particular personality representative of all beings. This is my difficulty I'm coming up against, but it's just representative of all beings in all our different ways. Can I, just for this moment, find the courage to open into it again?

I want to end with an example of how it's hard for all beings and we don't know, we never know what manifestation our path is going to take—how our deepening wisdom and compassion and courage and difficulty is going, what direction it's going to take us, how we're going to show up in the world. There's no template of how you should act or how we should live or how our awakening should manifest. But it does.

Some of you may have seen this film called *Blessings*, about Tsoknyi Rinpoche and some women going to see some nuns in Tibet—the Nuns of Nangchen—whom Rinpoche had been kind of responsible for. They traveled to this remote area of Tibet, just in the last couple of years, where there had been a series of forty nunneries with all these nuns doing really heavy-duty practice. During the Cultural Revolution, all forty nunneries were destroyed. The nuns had to disperse. Some were killed. Some went back to their families or regular life. Some were sent to work camps. A few went way, way higher up into caves in the mountains and just did their practice in hiding.

But for all of them, it was really tough times. Starvation. The ones who went back to their families had to act like normal people and be like secret yogis. They couldn't show that they were practicing, but they were committed. Very tough, horrible conditions, a lot of starvation, a lot of difficulty.

Just in the last few years, they've been able to start coming out. The nuns who were up in the hills have started coming down. The ones living with their families have started coming back out.

And by hand, they're rebuilding nunneries to live in. The film showed this, and it's pretty intense—they're dragging all these materials up huge mountains. I can't even imagine the suffering they had to go through. That was their particular path.

But I just want to leave you with this image from the very end of the movie. They go up to meet what they say is one of the oldest of the nuns, the one they think is the most realized. They climb up to some little hut where she agrees to see them.

She looks ancient—ten million lines in her face. She's had a really hard life. She could be 120, or she could be 35, who knows? She'd been through starvation. She was lying down; you couldn't tell if she was actually disabled and had to lie there or if she was just resting. And she was just spinning her prayer wheel.

And of course, since she was the oldest, most realized nun, her eyes were filled with light. Her face was filled with light. She's just spinning her prayer wheel nonstop. It seems like she lies there all day spinning her prayer wheel. She said, "My mind—all that's in my mind is just prayers for the happiness and well-being and freedom from suffering of all beings."

I thought, wow. What a way to spend your day. What a way. Who knows how her circuitous path took her there, buried somewhere way up in Tibet where nobody knows. And she's just there, every moment of the day, spinning her prayer wheel and sending out prayers for the well-being of all beings.

We never know. But stuff like that helps me refine my commitment. When I feel like I can't do it—we can do it. Because we don't have to do it. It does itself.

So let's just sit quietly for a minute.

Thank you for listening.

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