Investigating Personality View

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:03:50

So tonight I want to talk about investigating the sense of self, the idea of self—that anatta thing.

As hopefully you know by now, or believe, as far as we can tell, all the Buddha's teachings he taught not as philosophical concept, not as some kind of doctrines that we should discuss and try to understand and add to our collection of the way we understand the universe and have arguments with each other about. Everything he taught was to directly point our attention, our experience, to accurate recognition of things as they are. And that recognition, over and over, is what frees our mind, our heart, from confusion and from clinging—that is, from suffering.

And so too with the teachings on anatta, so-called not-self. But we think so much in philosophical, conceptual terms. While it's actually a very fascinating thing to explore in our practice—not some huge, big, monolithic, horrible thing that we somehow have to get through or get crazy thinking about—it's just something really fascinating to explore. But often just even mentioning anatta or not-self, everyone kind of tightens up or goes into whatever your reaction is.

This was true in the Buddha's time too. There were lots of spiritual seekers of different philosophies, different groups wandering around India, just like the Buddha and his nuns and monks were wandering around India. There are lots of different suttas where one or another is coming and talking to the Buddha, where they're having these dialogues. At the time, there were two kind of opposite views. One is eternalism—that I am a self and it will last after death. The other is annihilationism—that everything's gone, that when you die, there's nothing. But there were views and opinions.

People would come to him, and this is what we do too. We try to think about it, or all these questions come up: What happens to myself when I realize no self? What happens to the self that's here now? If there's no self, then who's eating the oatmeal? If there's no self, who's making these decisions? Who's sitting here? Who decided? On and on.

So some of us can make ourselves a little bit crazy thinking about it a lot and getting all worked up. If there's no self, who's sitting here stressing out, trying to figure out what does this mean about no self? And the more you think like that, the stronger what gets? Sense of me, right? "I've got to figure this out—it's impossible."

The other thing that a lot of times happens—I'm making broad strokes here; hopefully this is meant to be a practical talk, but right now I'm making broad strokes—the other thing that I see in myself or in talking to people is kind of putting the conceptual stuff on the side or trying to say, "Okay, I can't figure it out. So I

have this self and I just have to keep practicing until finally I get rid of it." And you're waiting for that big, mind-blowing experience that blows the self away. You finally realize anatta, and you're finally free forever from this sense of self.

Do you get how both of those are coming from a sense of self that's got to change, and then it's gone, and then we will be free? "I will be so happy when I no longer have a sense of self. But in the meantime, I've got to suffer and dig and I can't do it right."

It's not like that. It's not like that at all. It's more about—first we can just explore, it's fascinating—but on the conceptual level, can we be willing to just open into not knowing? Just not knowing. That space, that alive, curious space that doesn't have to land on any definition, on any experience for more than a second.

I want to read you one of the suttas, just a little short one, of one of the wanderers who came to the Buddha—Vacchagotta, who kind of shows up a lot. He never really quite gets it, and he wanders off.

So the wanderer Vacchagotta approached the Buddha and said, "How is it, Master Gotama, is there a self?" And this isn't like the first time he ever heard the Buddha's teachings. And the Blessed One was silent. "Then, Master Gotama, is there no self?" A second time, the Blessed One was silent. So then the wanderer Vacchagotta rose from his seat and departed. He didn't get much.

Then Ananda after that said, "Well, how come you didn't say anything? Why didn't you answer one way or the other?"

And so this is just kind of the subtlety of the Buddha. He said, "If, Ananda, when I was asked by Vacchagotta, 'Is there a self?' I had answered 'There is a self,' that would have been taking the side of all those Brahmins who are eternalists." Because that language—"there is a self"—fed into that view. "If, on the other hand, when he said, 'Is there no self?' I had answered, 'There is no self,' that would have been taking the side of all the ones who are annihilationists." So there's no way he could answer without feeding into the current concepts.

Then he keeps going—that's not all. "If, Ananda, when I was asked by Vacchagotta, 'Is there a self?' I had answered 'There is a self,' would this have been consistent on my part with the arising of the knowledge that all phenomena are not-self?"

So here he's saying all phenomena is not self, and Ananda replies, "No, venerable sir." And if, when asked by Vajagata, "Is there no self?" the Buddha had answered, "There is no self," the wanderer, already confused, would have fallen into even greater confusion, thinking, "It seems that the self I formerly had does not exist now."

I can kind of relate to that—maybe not, maybe it's only me—but I can relate to some of these confusions. And the subtlety of the Buddha: he's not interested in propagating some doctrine that "this is how it is." If saying "there's no self" or "all phenomena is not self" is going to fuel a view in the listener's mind, or get

them more confused, he doesn't say it. It's really fascinating. I love that because it really points to what he's teaching.

This whole thing I want to talk about tonight is to explore—just to explore—when we notice the experience of a sense of self, or a little bit broader, sakāya-diṭṭhi, personality view, which is talked about a lot. Can we, rather than jump onto whatever view we have—it is, it isn't, it should go, it shouldn't go—just surrender into not knowing, but with awareness, with interest, and actually explore?

The sense of self, the arising of sakāya-diṭṭhi, view of personality, is simply another saṅkhāra, another mental formation arising in a moment. It lasts a little bit. It passes. That's all.

I think Guy read, maybe in his talk on the aggregates—anyway, one line from one of the suttas where the Buddha says that consciousness is like a magic show. And I think to talk about the sense of self or sakāya-diṭṭhi, personality view, that's a really good way to think about it. It's like a magic show.

There's a lovely little pamphlet from many years ago from the Buddhist Publication Society by Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda called *The Magic of the Mind*. He uses this metaphor of how it's a magic show. I remember years ago reading that at the very beginning of my practice when I didn't know anybody who practiced. I would just get these books from the Buddhist Publication Society in Sri Lanka. They kind of saved my life, kept me from thinking I was really nuts.

Anyway, just using this image—and it's a great image for the sense of personality view or the sense of self. If there's a magic show and someone's in town doing all this magic, when we just see the externals, we know somehow there's a trick, but we don't see it. So we think, "Wow, that's great! That's amazing!" But when you see behind how the trick is done, all the magic falls apart, doesn't it? It becomes mundane, obvious. You can see—I don't know exactly how they do it—but how he pulls the rabbit out of the hat or whatever. It's okay. It loses its fascination. You can see how it's done.

It's exactly like that with our sense of self. It seems so real, so solid, so taken for granted, so impenetrable, so inescapable—because it's unexamined.

This is from Ramana Maharshi: "The idea of self is like a ghost caused by the play of shadows. Look closely and the ghost vanishes. It was never there. So also with the self or ego"—he's using that word. "So long as one does not look closely at it, it continues to give trouble. But when one looks for it, it is not found to exist in any way of separate existence."

So just tonight, a few aspects—because there's so much one could say—but a few ways of using our practice, and it's all stuff we've talked about already, to look behind that curtain of the magic show. Not just once, but ten million times. To really look behind the curtain, not just stop with, "Oh yeah, sense of self again. When am I ever going to get rid of this?" We've stopped looking right there.

Sakāya-diṭṭhi, translated as personality view—in the formal way of talking about the Theravāda stages of

awakening, it's said that belief in sakāya-diṭṭhi is seen through at the first level of awakening, stream entry. The belief in personality view. It doesn't mean it doesn't arise anymore. It doesn't mean sense of self doesn't arise anymore. But some of the solidity, some of the magic goes out when we remember to look.

Sayadaw U Lakkhana, a Burmese teacher in the Mahāsi tradition with whom I've taught a few times in Upper Burma, gave a description of sakāya-diṭṭhi that I liked a lot. He defined sakāya as the stream of sixth sense door experiences, the stream of nāma-rūpa. What we've talked about a lot: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, cognizing with the mind. As we've said, just six things happening over and over and over.

Cognizing with the mind encompasses a lot. But that's all, right? Just different things happening.

And so, *sakkāya* is that. And when it's just going along—when people come in and say, "Well, I just had such a great open awareness sitting. Things just coming and going, and it was so nice." Why was it so nice? Because stuff was just coming and going. Just the *sakkāya* going along.

What makes *sakkāya diṭṭhi*, personality view—and this we can notice also—is like seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, thinking, thinking, thinking, thinking. Something comes, and it's as if that internal hand of grasping in the mind comes up and goes, "I. Am. Mine." A thought, a perception, a sound, an unpleasant or pleasant feeling tone. We may not notice what's being grasped, but it's as if everything's coming and going and suddenly—oh. This one is me or mine. Not telegraphed so clearly as that, but it just starts to feel glitched up. And then the whole story of me is created in like a second, which I'll describe in a minute, although I'm sure you're quite aware of it.

So really seeing over and over: some aspect, some phenomena that's just coming and going is mistakenly viewed as me or mine. And that leads, just like that, to a whole series of thoughts and associations and further graspings—birth of sense of self ten million times a day. But without exploring it, it seems like it's just always here.

It's like the story—I'm sure you're quite familiar with the story of the two Zen monks, an older monk and a younger one. They're walking together and they come to a stream that's really quite rapid water. There's a young woman there trying to get across and can't. So the older monk picks her up, they all walk across the stream, he puts her down, and they walk on. Nothing is said.

After quite some time, the younger monk, who has apparently been seething this whole time but hasn't said anything, turns to the older monk and says, "What are you doing? You broke your *sīla*! You broke your precepts! You know you're not allowed to touch a woman, and you just picked her up!" And on and on. The older monk says, "I put her down at the stream. It seems you've been carrying her this whole time."

That's a good example of *sakkāya diṭṭhi*. The younger monk was carrying that perception, the thought about what should be, a sense of self-righteousness and aversion. You can see how it just goes and

goes—the sense of him and what's right, the other guy and what's wrong. So strong, so real. We get so seduced into the story and the feelings that we may not notice how that clutching to whatever it was—with the second monk, maybe the idea that's the wrong thing to do and I'm right—we don't even see the *sakkāya diṭṭhi*, the creation of personality view, of a sense of self in that. We can think we're quite mindful but be more involved in the specifics.

Have you noticed that your mind ever does that? Ever noticed?

I'll give another very simple example. I had it in my notes. I'd forgotten it, but it's just a good little example of how our mind does this all the time when not investigated. See, that's the thing—our investigation tends to snap shut and go, "Oh, me again! I'm so..." fill in the blanks.

So I remember I was trying to fix some little thing in my house. I'm not that dexterous with eye-hand coordination. It took me fifty years to figure that out, but I'm not. So I was just trying to put up the shower curtain or something, and it was just taking me a while. I'd just get it, it would slip. I'd just get it, it would slip. And I was getting a little frustrated.

And the thought comes in, "Ah, I'm so clumsy." I mean, that's just okay. But that sense of *me* around the "I'm so clumsy"—like what I just said, "I don't have good eye-hand coordination"—and then memories started coming of all the different times in my life when I've been clumsy. Maybe not all of them, but some of them. Back to when I was in the remedial gym class in fifth grade. And that really set a whole tone for my life. That's who I am: the clumsy person who was in remedial gym class, scarred for life about that.

And I saw this happen. I saw *how* that happened. That took like a second, right? Wow, that's sakkāya-diṭṭhi—sense of self so strong, the clinging to the aversion to not doing it well, to the thought "this is who I am." And then what selective perception! The memories come that fit that perception. Every moment of my life have I been clumsy? Probably not. Have there been other things going on in my life that had nothing to do with that? Yeah, once or twice. But those particular memories come, it solidifies, and we tell ourselves the story of who we are.

This is broader than just a little oomph of self. It's the story of who we are, based on grasping at a particular perception, a particular sense or experience, and then all the stories spun around it.

Often, that's the place investigation stops. "Oh yes, really caught in this sense of me." It's like awareness snaps shut. Or even if we're being mindful—and we are being mindful—we could be mindful of the specifics: the sensations in my hand, the tightness when the thing would drop, the pressure in my mind, the aversion going on, the images coming up. I could be mindful but still fascinated by all the objects and not quite turn around and notice that sense of grasping at *me* in all of those. Memory is me. Clumsiness is me. This thought of my life history is me.

And then if you start thinking, "But it *is* me—who else had that?" That's thinking. That's just another thought. You're just talking moment-to-moment experience. You can think you're mindful but not see the

bigger background grasping that's coloring the perception at that moment, which is the sakkāya-diṭṭhi, the sense of me.

But we can just keep on looking. This isn't about hating it or getting rid of it. We notice, "Oh, sakkāya-diṭṭhi here right now." Instead of saying, "That's who I am, a hopeless klutz, that's it," we see how it's constructed and arising in that moment, and how it passes. Yes, a new one comes, often pretty quickly, but keep on looking, keep on staying with the steadiness of mindfulness, of awareness. Even if the thought comes up, "Oh, it's hopeless"—just another thought. Because the magic show starts to unravel.

And it all starts with perception. The whole nature of insight, as I think we've said, isn't like getting to some new place. It's a shift of perception, where the perception is no longer colored by confusion, by greed, by wanting, by limitation—where the perception is more accurate. And then the way we think about it and the way we act becomes more appropriate.

So there's a story I've used before because it's so perfect for illustrating how perception leads to how we think about ourselves and the world, and how that thinking then leads to the view, the description. This would be personality view arising really quick, in a moment. If we can watch that over and over without identifying, without getting all upset because it keeps happening—just watch how it happens over and over—the seduction of the magic show starts to fall away. It can be fascinating to watch, but more on the level of, "That's how you do it, that's how it's put together," rather than, "I don't know how this happened, but here I am again."

So this little story my good friend in Switzerland told me. Many years ago, she was sitting a retreat, one of her first retreats. Not in a retreat center—this was before there was one in Switzerland—but the people putting on the retreat would rent a house, like we used to do here back in the seventies or early eighties.

And they have many big old houses in Switzerland that they use for children in the summer—I don't know what you call them, like summer camps. We would think of them as a big scout house or something. They're large, but they're not really insulated. They're old, made out of wood, very noisy and creaky. You think it's creaky on the floor here? Forget about it.

So this old creaky house. It was a ten-day retreat, very strict schedule like here. The room they were using for the meditation hall was upstairs, and the room for walking was down below on the ground floor. It was like this, but without all the insulation in between.

So it was a sitting period, and she was sitting and just starting to get a little something going with her breath, you know, finally. Finally a little bit of concentration, finally. And then she heard someone walking downstairs, and she could hear because the creaks were so loud—like I said about the radiators the other night, like gunshots going off.

"God, it's completely ruining my concentration."

She started getting more and more annoyed. I don't know if any of you can relate. But she started to get more and more annoyed. And then, see, it was fed by: "But this is a sitting period. People shouldn't be walking in the sitting period. This is only a short ten-day retreat." And nothing personal, but it was Switzerland. So this is the sitting period—this is when you sit. And in the walking period is when you walk. It's very orderly. There's something very nice about it. You know what you're supposed to do at the time you're supposed to do it. And people actually do that. The Americans might like to know—people actually do that. It's very refreshing. I like it.

Anyway, so there's this creaking, and it's driving her crazy, and her mind is going, "Oh, what's the matter with these people?" And it was just getting more and more blown up. Finally she said, "Okay, getting out of control. Let me just come back to the breath." So she tried to come back to the breath, really just feeling the breath coming in and going out.

And then she realized her attention came back to her body, and she realized she was sitting leaning against the wall. Every time she breathed in and her abdomen expanded and her back hit the wall, she was making that noise. That was the noise she was hearing.

So that's a perfect example: perception inaccurate, leaping to conclusions, unpleasant—and the whole story of, you know, "This is what's supposed to be" and "It's ruining my concentration" and on and on into the anger—that's the whole story of me. And you see how when the perception became accurate, that whole story went away. Just gone.

But what maybe we don't notice when that happens is how quick the next story starts. And we don't notice that it's two completely different *saṅkhāras*, two completely different formations.

So I can imagine—she didn't say this, but knowing her, I can imagine the immediate next story would be: "How could I have been so angry and thinking that? I'm so rigid. I'm so uptight. Why can't I relax?" Can you imagine it going off on a whole new one?

Somehow that's what's called *papañca*, right? Take the grasp, the perception, and run, basically. Somehow the mind just really seems to love doing that. Have you noticed?

Most of the *papañca* is the creation of *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*. Notice that.

Not just one sakkāya diṭṭhi, many. And if I say that and you think, "Oh God, yes, it's true. What's wrong with me?" Same thing, same thing. We don't have to get rid of that. This isn't about needing to get rid of it. It's about understanding how it's working.

When there's accurate recognition, the fascination goes out by itself. When my friend recognized that the sound was coming from her breathing, she really couldn't work up anger at the unknown person walking anymore. You just really can't do it. It doesn't make any sense. So in that moment when I saw that whole sakkāya diṭṭhi about being clumsy in the third grade and all of that, it's just kind of, "Oh, okay, fine."

There's nothing to do about it. And the next moment it's gone, and you're into a new one. There's nothing we have to fight. We can explore how it happens.

So part of the exploration on this level of thought is just to notice that. Really make it fun. Make it interesting. It's not something to hate. When we're feeling, "Oh no, I don't want to see sense of self again," when we feel so victimized by it—well, that's a pretty big one. That's just fear. We're never going to see clearly from that place. That's when awareness snaps shut.

As Sayadaw U Pandita said, and I've mentioned this before, with awareness we don't need to be afraid of anything. I love it when I see a sense of self. I may not love the story that it's telling. But when I see, "Oh, that's sakkāya diṭṭhi"—sakkāya diṭṭhi's like this, to quote Ajahn Sumedho—it's great. Sometimes we can see it really small and specific, like I just traced through with my friend. Sometimes it's all spinning and you realize, "Oh, I'm back in clumsy remedial gym class sakkāya diṭṭhi." Didn't quite see how I got there, but I can feel it. Oh, sakkāya diṭṭhi's like this. Feel it, notice it. The phone rings, you're into something new.

I'm not saying there's only one sakkāya diṭṭhi, then the next, then the next, with no gaps in between. Otherwise it would be hopeless. But I'll get to that in a minute.

So first, just discovering—as Ajahn Sumedho says, we create our sense of self with our thoughts over and over all day long. And he says we cannot with our thoughts create a peaceful self. So of course when we're locked in that sense of self, it's a little bit unsettling, even when it's a happy one. It's still a little bit, or a lot, unsettling because it's really like a square peg in a round hole. It's not really quite fitting with reality. And even the good ones—it's just some idea that's going to go.

But we don't have to be afraid. Just watch how it happens. Watch how any sense contact—and we can be calm, present, awake—and any sense contact, there can suddenly be a sense of grasping and suddenly it's triggered into the story of me. It could be anything. The most neutral, mundane thing or something really awful, it really doesn't matter what. It's so fun. It's really fun to just explore. It's like looking at a puzzle. How did this one get started? Don't make yourself crazy with it, but how did this one get started? And notice when it stops.

Notice how in "I'm the sad person," "I'm the lonely person," all the things are coming up, all the memories. You feel it, you're exploring it in your body. Again, as I say, we can be quite mindful but without quite noticing what's the attitude in the mind, or what's the belief, that's the sense of self that's feeding it. I am the lonely person.

It's always been like this. Here I am. Who but a lonely neurotic misfit would come on a three-month retreat where you don't talk to people? Who else is here? Maybe everyone else is a neurotic misfit too, so then maybe we're not misfits because we're all here together. But I don't want to just be like everyone else. I really want to be special. That's why I'm... and on and on and on.

Then at the end of the day, you think, "Well, it's been like that all day." Stop a minute and see. You stopped

being the neurotic misfit maybe when you heard the lunch bell. You became the hungry person pretending not to be hungry. You became the person wanting to be at the head of the line but going to the end of the line so no one else can tell how greedy I am—as if anyone else cares, because they're all doing their own number. But we don't notice that.

Then there's a time when you're just the person standing there. You're not even a person. There's just hearing, seeing, smelling, tasting. You walk, you sit down and go, "Ah, I'm the person so embarrassed to have all these people around me while I'm eating. I'm just a neurotic misfit." Yes, because I am a neurotic misfit, and that's what I've been all day. Not noticing all the other ones—they don't count.

And it doesn't have to be neurotic misfit. It could be that you're the Maitreya Buddha in hiding, and you're almost there because you're having good sittings. That's the next day, right? Have you noticed it goes Maitreya Buddha one day and neurotic misfit the next day, and then it kind of goes back and forth? That's how these things work. That's how the retreat works. That's normal.

So notice all of them. I'm making them funny on purpose. They're not all funny. Sometimes it's really painful. I'm not belittling the pain. We can bring our tender awareness to all of it—the beauty, the pain, the boring, the neutral—just noticing this magic show as it's going on. We don't need to land as "me" in any of it. And when we do land, we can see that as just another arising appearance.

As Ajahn Buddhadasa wrote in his book *Heartwood of the Bodhi Tree*, which is a great book on anattā and sense of self, he says the sense of self is merely a condition that arises when there's grasping or clinging in the mind. That's all. It arises when there's clinging. It goes into all this story that creates the personality view. And when the clinging goes, the whole thing's gone. A new one comes, but they're different. Each one is arising, each one is passing. Sense of self is not a steady, unchanging thing. It comes and goes, comes and goes. If we stay steady with our interest, with our mindfulness, we can't help but see that sometimes. And that gets even more interesting.

So this habit of papañca, as the Buddha described it: what one perceives, one feels. Perception and vedanā come right together. What one feels, one thinks about. What one thinks about, one complicates with perceptions and associations that then assail—which means attack—a person. Like the story of the monk who drew a tiger on the wall of his cave, and it was so realistic it scared him. That's what's going on with papañca. This kind of concocting is this great word.

Concocting means kind of putting stuff together. If English isn't your first language, it's maybe not a word you'd hear that much. It means creating, putting together, manufacturing. But to me, in English, "concocting" has a little bit of the sense that you're really just kind of making it up—you're just imagining, putting it together. Let me concoct some kind of a stew from all these ingredients that happen to be in the refrigerator. It's kind of haphazard.

It isn't even that the thinking is the problem when we can be aware of it. It only becomes a problem, we

get lost in it, when we're not recognizing the whole process and we take the content to be the reality. Take the content to be true. But when we can just notice the whole process and see how it works, we don't have to land in any of the content as being true. Even my memories—yes, but that did happen—that's just a story right now.

I got this really clearly one time when I was on a long retreat. I was watching a lot of different stories of Carol, and now Carol's doing this, and now Carol's doing that, and so on. Do you have that, where you're narrating: now I'm getting up, now I'm taking a step, now I'm serving the soup? Watching the whole thing. But I had—I don't know if it was a mistake—just before the retreat I had seen a movie, *The Fugitive*. I don't know if you remember it—a very thrilling movie with Harrison Ford, a lot of action.

So if any of you have had the experience of having to relive over and over, like James with his song, a movie that you saw or some TV show—I would be sitting, the Carol thing would go, and then the fugitive would start, and the memories and the emotions would come, and it would go, and then I'd stop and go back. I think I was even doing metta at the time. And then all the Carol stuff would start.

After a while, I realized both processes were exactly the same. Sometimes the image of Harrison Ford came up and the story went off in that direction. Sometimes the image of Carol came up and the story went off in that direction. It was exactly the same process. One of them wasn't more real than the other. A few did have a little more interesting content. But one wasn't like "me," you know. It was both just perceptions and feelings and thoughts and emotions coming and going, coming and going.

Try that next time, noticing sakkāya-diṭṭhi. You don't have to give it a movie review, but just watch it like that and see what that's like.

So the sense of self is merely a condition that arises when there's grasping and clinging in the mind. As such, a saṅkhāra—just another arising phenomenon that arises in awareness, that awareness can be with, that awareness can see dissipate, just like anything. It's not something to get rid of. It's just to watch it come and go. So what? It comes, just like craving. You don't need to be afraid of craving. We see it come. We see how it acts. We experience the suffering, and it goes. Same, just exactly the same.

Ajahn Buddhadasa again talks about it in terms of dependent origination, which Guy spoke about the other night. He's so down-to-earth, Buddhadasa, in the way he would talk about things. In the same section of dependent origination Guy discussed—where contact, the sense perception, leads to vedanā, to feeling tone, which leads to taṇhā, to craving or not wanting, which leads to grasping at something—Buddhadasa, in terms of talking about this sense of self, describes this place where the craving, just the subtle leaning forward, moves to grasping. He describes the grasping as the feeling of "I" and "mine."

And he calls it—I love this—in Pali, well, in English it translates as "I-ing" and "my-ing," because it's a verb. "I" isn't a thing. It's simply an arising experience, yathā bhūta, due to conditions in this moment. I-ing and my-ing—ahaṅkāra and mamaṅkāra in Pali. I just like that. You don't need to remember it, but I just like it.

So the grasping is the feeling of "I" and "mine," the formation, the coming together in that moment of I-ing and my-ing.

And it gives rise—the next step is *bhava*, having and being. So I-ing and my-ing, having and being. Having these thoughts, being this person. It's a little more solidified in the view, in the mind at that point.

And then having and being what? That becomes birth, *jati*. That's the next step—birth, the birth of me in that moment.

Now, this can be a really simple thing. Again, I had this written down from another retreat. This is incredibly simple: just walking through the dining room as a yogi, because we notice these things more, and there's a bowl of candy out. Not an eight-precept little hard sugar candy, but some nice thing—something more tempting to me anyway. And there's a bowl of candy and I'm just walking, pretty present, relaxed, pretty mindful. No big thing going on, no big sense of me.

And there's the seeing of the candy, the pleasant feeling, the arising of wanting, and right away the sense of I wanting the candy. And right then you can feel the birth of self. That's me, and that's the candy, and I want it. And the hand goes towards it and starts to pick it up. It doesn't matter whether you take it or not. But I remember this particular time, I was like, "Oh," just put it down, and walked on.

The candy was out of sight. The whole sense of birth—that was the death of that self right then. Didn't carry the wanting the candy with me. Just gone. And then you walk on, and that's gone. That's over. Birth and death of self just in a flash like that.

There's nothing to be scared of and nothing to worry about, but we can explore it like that. See how it comes. See what keeps it going. What makes it last longer? How it gets put down. Really, when the craving is released, there's that death of that sense of self at that moment. But just explore it. Don't hold the sense you've got to get rid of it.

And in terms of what I just described—noticing the perception, noticing the *vedana*, and noticing the wanting—as I said before, sometimes it's a lot faster than that. All of a sudden, we're in me and *sakkāya-diṭṭhi* and the whole story. We didn't get to notice all these little subtle quick things happening, right? I grabbed the candy, or I didn't, either one. And I walk on. Okay, I didn't take the candy, but I walk on going, "Ah, I wish I'd taken it. I should have taken it. Maybe I'll go back when no one's looking and I will take it." Or I didn't take it and I'll go back when they are looking so I can just be humble and let people see me take it—whatever it is. The sense of self growing and growing and growing, because the craving is growing and growing and growing.

But that doesn't mean it's hopeless. It's just that sometimes it goes really fast. I read from Ajahn Chah once describing that whole chain of dependent origination. We give all these twelve links like we just did. But it happens really fast. He said it happens so fast it's like falling out of a tree. He said, if you fall out of a tree and you go down, and on the way down you hit all twelve branches, but it's just like—whoa, boom—and

there you are. You land in *dukkha*. You didn't really have time to notice each branch on the way down, but you land in *dukkha*, the twelve steps of dependent origination.

So sometimes it's like that. I'm back in my room, just dying, because I either did or didn't take the candy. No way to win either way. Okay, this is *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*.

Sakayaditti is like this. Remember some of those phrases—"it's just like this." Awareness is always available.

It's not like, "Oh, here I am in sakayaditti and I didn't notice where the papañca started or the vedanā. It's hopeless. How did I get here?" Oh—hopeless. Sakayaditti. It's like this. And just feel it. Big picture. That's fine.

That's a movement from landing in the story and believing it, to saying, "Oh, that's the process." I don't see all the little ways the magic show is working, but I do see that it's a magic show. This is this particular moment of sakayaditti—the shift from identifying to recognizing the concocting.

And the more the magic show is seen through, the less fascinating it becomes. I bet that's true now for all of you. Have you gotten a little bit tired of your stories yet? A little bit, huh?

Now, we cannot move into aversion with that, but there can be that sense of nibbidā, that sense of disenchantment. So here comes this story of "I'm so greedy." Oh yeah, here comes that story. I see how that started. Okay, let it just poop out. I don't need to get involved. Disenchantment.

Here comes the story about being the next Maitreya Buddha because I was able to stay mindful for two steps. Isn't that great? Yeah, that's fine. Sakayaditti. It'll just poop out by itself. You don't have to do anything about it. Just watch it. It loses its fascination.

And then we start to notice what Buddhadasa again talks about in this book: suññatā, or emptiness, which he's specifically using to mean emptiness of self. "Voidness" is how this translation renders it—I don't know, it doesn't really roll off the tongue—but emptiness of sense of self.

And he says over and over that emptiness of self, emptiness of sense of self, moments when there's not I-ing and my-ing, when there's not sakayaditti being created and held to—these are really normal and natural. There are many, many, many moments every day that are empty of the clinging of sense of self, that are not sakayaditti created. Many moments where there's just the simplicity of non-clinging. We've talked about that before—the simplicity of not-self, when we're not caught up and fascinated by the relationship to what's arising and what does it mean about me, when we're not in clinging.

So he talks about how it's really important for us to generate a contentment with this emptiness. First recognizing that it's really normal and natural—again, just little moments all through the day. If you're waiting for the big bang, forget about it. Notice these little moments, sort of what Guy was talking about—what did he call it, the sweet spot or something? But not even a spot, just moments that are empty

of the clinging of self, of any story that we're clinging to of sakayaditti. There can be thoughts, but there's not the belief, the personality belief.

So we can recognize this and generate a contentment. And that's really important because it may not be as fulfilling as we might think it's going to be. In a moment when there's no self, guess what? There's no one there to feel fulfilled. There's just nothing special.

So noticing that—just as the sense of self arises and passes many, many times in a day, birth and death of self hundreds of times—notice in between the birth and death. Notice the silence of the mind in a moment that's not concocting, that's not fabricating, that's not having to go out and get involved in whatever's happening.

There's a great Pali word for this: atammayatā.

Again, from Buddhadasa—he said toward the end of his life, apparently, he talked about this a lot. He said atamayata is the ultimate Buddhist concept. That was just Buddhadasa talking. But what it really means is non-fabricating, the mind that's non-fabricating, the mind that's non-concocting. That's just not making something out of anything.

As it's described, Ajahn Amaro talks about it a lot in this book, *The Island*. He's trying to describe it. It's pointing to moments of citta, moments when the heart or mind is independent, when it's not affected by wanting, by aversion, by delusion. It's not nibbana, but it's, as we've talked about, the pure heart and mind that's not affected by greed, hatred, and delusion. The quality of mindfulness is what allows clear seeing to arise. But just the experience of this atamayata—the times when you're awake and the mind just isn't involved in making some big deal about anything. There can be thinking or not thinking, but there's not that clinging. It's not concocting. The silence of the non-reactive mind is a way you could put it.

When there's insufficient mindfulness and wisdom, Amaro writes, the mind goes out and attaches itself to stuff. The bowl of candy, the unpleasant sensation, whatever it is. It attaches to perceptions, attaches to moods. Then there's the whole thing of papañca, the whole creation of sakkāya-diṭṭhi. When there's this non-concocting, these moments of emptiness that Buddhadasa is talking about, a contentment with them, to just appreciate when seeing is just seeing, when hearing is just hearing—then this whole papañca is not created and the heart rests at ease.

This is one way the Buddha describes himself. I like this a lot, one of the Buddha's descriptions of how his mind is: "Thus, bhikkhus, the Tathagata does not conceive of a visible thing separate from sight." Do you get what that means? There's seeing, but he doesn't think about some visible thing, me seeing it. There's just seeing. He does not conceive of something not seen. He does not conceive of a thing to be seen. He does not conceive about a seer, about someone who's seeing. You get a sense of that? It's back to "in the seen, there's just the seen." The mind just doesn't concoct anything else. It's just seeing.

So if I'm sitting here, there's seeing, and I think I'm seeing you—that's a concoction. I think, "Well, I

wonder what's outside that I could see"—that's a concoction. Something about me, something about you—concoction. Just seeing with nothing extra. And then he goes through all the different sense bases—seeing, hearing, thinking, feeling: "Thus, bhikkhus, the Tathagata is just like this, such-like, in regard to all phenomena seen, heard, sensed, and cognized. Whatever seen, heard, sensed, or clung to is known as truth by other folk. Amidst those who are entrenched, who are stuck in views, I hold none as true or false."

You get a sense of this. Whatever is seen, heard, sensed, or clung to, the ordinary person holds as truth. And he's saying, "I don't cling to any view at all." There's no need to make up a view about anything. Anything. Can we stay in that? That simplicity, just this. It says "such-like." The Tathagata is such-like. It's just this. The silence of the non-reactive mind, whatever's arising.

There's a nice reformulation of the Four Noble Truths by Ajahn Dun along these lines. He says, "The mind that goes out to whatever's arising in order to satisfy its moods is the cause of suffering." You get a sense of that? It goes out to whatever's happening. "I need that candy to satisfy my mood"—the cause of suffering. "The result that comes from the mind going out in order to satisfy its moods is suffering"—the first noble truth. So whether I took that candy or I didn't take the candy, all the hoo-ha that was going on, that's the first noble truth. The mind seeing the mind clearly

is the path leading to the cessation of suffering. That's what we're doing here—the mind seeing the mind clearly. The result of the mind seeing the mind clearly is the cessation of suffering.

I love that because that's really our job. Not to get rid of something, not to give ourselves a new sakkāya-diṭṭhi, not to change our personality—but to see the mind clearly, to see how it works, to really begin to recognize these moments of simplicity, the silence of the non-reactive mind, these moments of suññatā, of emptiness. Just recognize clearly.

You know those times—we've talked about them a lot—when there's no clinging, when you're not even thinking about it. You're just sitting here and it's just peace. I'm not talking about some big cessation moment, just no concocting, nothing extra. And you'd say later—a friend of mine calls it "the place of no problem." Everything was fine and it didn't matter what was happening, whether you're drinking tea or walking outside or feeling your breath or there's an ache in the back. It doesn't matter. And I know you all know those moments. You go, "It didn't matter, but now it does." Why? And that, of course, is one of the big mysteries.

So generating a contentment with emptiness, really letting it in. But then the question—we only have four minutes—the question is, why do we keep getting tricked back into sakkāya-diṭṭhi? Doesn't it feel like that sometimes? It's so peaceful, you think there could never be a problem again. Have you had that feeling? "I'm never going to believe that again. I see through it so clearly." How do we get tricked again?

So just two ideas. One is something Ajahn Sumedho said once that I found so interesting. He was talking to

a group of Vipassana teachers, we were just having a discussion, and he was saying—in his opinion, having been teaching for thirty-some years, both Thai people and Westerners—in his opinion, the biggest hindrance for Western meditators that he sees is our self-doubt. Self-doubt in regards to trusting our insights into awareness. Westerners tend not to trust our insights into the potential liberation of awareness. Not that we don't have them, but we don't trust them. And he says, in his opinion, why we don't trust them is partly because in this culture, our personalities are so strong, and our belief, our reliance, our taking refuge in our personalities, is so strong. That's what we believe.

When you're spinning—"Oh, I'm like this and I'm like that and I can never change and this is my personality and how can I change it?"—and it was just this moment of real peace and emptiness, but now again I'm caught because really it's hopeless for me, isn't it? With this personality and what I've been through. And that's what we really believe.

I just think that's a fascinating idea to drop in and look at. The personality is so much our reference point that it's just so comfortable, we get caught back into it again. Just notice when that's happening. And just that shift—"Oh, personality views like this"—that's a huge shift. In that moment, that's an unhooking from the total belief and refuge in "I am this personality," the I-ing and my-ing. So just awareness noticing: coming and going, different personality all the time.

Impermanence is also very important. When he was asked, the Buddha, how should one know, how should one see for identity view to be abandoned, he said: as impermanent. When one sees the eye as impermanent, the view of self is abandoned. Identity view is abandoned. When one sees forms, eye consciousness, eye contact, and feeling—whatever feeling arises with eye contact—as impermanent, identity view is abandoned. And with all the senses, of course.

So again, it's the steadiness of awareness, of mindfulness, that allows the perception of impermanence to be recognized. Coming and going all the time, steady awareness can't help but notice it.

So noticing impermanence, the perception of impermanence, generating a contentment with this emptiness, with this voidness—and noticing when there's not the contentment with voidness, when that sense of the personality view, the sense of me, you see the death of it. And there's just a moment where there's not a new arising of me happening. Just notice that. Or do you notice in that there's a dulling out, a kind of zoning out, until some new thing comes and grabs the attention, often a clinging or an aversion? Or sometimes it's neutral, but we're quite awake, and there's a feeling of a little bit of disquiet, a little bit of discomfort, almost like we're waiting for the next thing to happen.

And we think we want—and that's our problem, of course—but we think we want the experience of recognizing the death of self, the moments of peace, emptiness when there's no identity view being clung to. But often that's uncomfortable.

We're so attached to that sense of me. Even when it's a suffering me, for many people—I notice in

myself—there's a kind of comfort of familiarity. You know, like putting on an old bathrobe that's so old and comfortable, even though it's all ratty and a little bit dirty, but you just feel soothed.

So have you noticed your mind going back to cling even to a suffering sakkāya diṭṭhi? It goes away, and you go, "But what about my loneliness? Let's go back to that one, because otherwise..." What? There's nothing happening. It's a little—not even scary—but just a little unfamiliar.

You know, we don't like this. The mind wants security. It likes familiarity. We want to go back to what we know. That's why we like to have views about what the doctrine is and hold to it, rather than just this willingness to open into the unknown in this moment, without a place to land, without a view to hold to, without a sense of self to say, "This is who I am."

So notice those moments of voidness. Notice in between experience. Maybe thoughts end and a new thought hasn't arisen. Just stay awake there. Notice if you jump to the breath or you jump to the body so—God forbid—there should be a space. Notice between activities. You know you're finished eating? Just sit and be quiet. Don't jump up and go do the next thing. We have to note, note, note, note. Nothing's happening. No, what am I going to note? What's going to... Something!

Just incline the mind to nothing special, to emptiness, to voidness. Give it a chance to recognize the empty nature of awareness. Nowhere to go. Nothing to do. Nothing to have.

You don't create anything. I don't create anything. We're not getting rid of some sense of some self in order to be no self. We're just noticing how the magic show works. And when we see through it, we don't have to suffer from it anymore. It doesn't have to keep tricking us.

I'll just end with this from Ajahn Sumedho: "It's often said that the Buddhist way is not to grasp, but that can become just another statement that we grasp and hold on to. It's a catch-22. No matter how hard you try to make sense out of it, you end up in total confusion because of the limitation of language and perception. We have to go beyond language and perception. And the only way to go beyond thinking and emotional habit is through awareness of them—through awareness of thought, through awareness of emotion. The island that you cannot go beyond"—the name of this book, *The Island*, the metaphor for Nibbāna—"is the metaphor for this state of being awake and aware, as opposed to the concept of becoming awake and aware."

So let's just quietly be awake and aware.

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