Exploring Sense of Self

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 51:10

So the other night, Sally spoke about delusion. One major aspect, one major way that delusion shows up is misperception. This is what Vance spoke about when he mentioned the *vipalasas*, the distortions—sometimes people translate it as the hallucinations of perception. Due to *kilesa* in the mind, the mind simply recognizes something wrongly. And then we think about that and we act from that. Unfortunately, that's what we're doing a lot of the time.

One of the major ways that insight actually works, what insight actually is, is a shift of perception. It's not that the way the Dhamma is or the way reality is changes, but the perception shifts, the *kilesas* go, and perception comes into alignment with how things actually are. That gives rise to appropriate response, to appropriate understanding.

Sayadaw U Pandita said once that when delusion, when *moha* is operating in the mind, we don't see what is here and we do see what's not here. It's really true.

The Dalai Lama has said many times—actually Thich Nhat Hanh, many people say the same thing—but I like this one from the Dalai Lama: "All of our difficulties come from mistaken perception. And this ignorance is at the root of the 84,000 destructive emotions and cognitive obscurations." You think you've had a lot of destructive emotions so far—84,000, and cognitive obscurations! But we can narrow it down to greed, hatred, and delusion, and that's just fine, because they're all subsets of that.

The Dalai Lama goes on to say that when our hearts and minds are not clouded by confusion, what he believes are our true human values—wisdom, compassion, generosity, *metta*, equanimity—these qualities of heart and mind are what naturally manifest in response to life when the mind and heart isn't clouded.

So our path of awakening, our path of *sati-paññ*a, mindfulness and wisdom, as we've said a million times—I'll say it again—it's not to annihilate the 84,000 destructive emotions. It's not to push them away. It's not to try and force clear seeing. But the simplicity of steady *sati*, the simplicity of steady mindfulness, actually allows for the perception to shift.

What we're really doing is bringing our attention. It's not that we have to get rid of the deluded mind, because how do we get rid of it? With more aversion, right? It doesn't work. But a lot of our practice is simply the steadiness of awareness, seeing how the deluded mind works.

So you've had a lot of practice with that already. You'll have a lot more. Instead of thinking something's going wrong, you can think, "Great, this is an opportunity to really watch with kind awareness how the deluded mind works." I'm not kidding. That's a so much more helpful attitude than, "I can't believe this is

happening again. I've seen it. I know it. I can't believe it." How is the deluded mind working in this moment?

This is from Thanissaro Bhikkhu, talking about *samsara*—speaking of the deluded mind. This is my current favorite quotation: "*Samsara* literally means wandering on. Many people think of it as the Buddhist name for the place where we currently live, the place we leave when we go to *Nibbana*. But in early Buddhist texts, *samsara* is the answer not to 'where are we?' but to 'what are we doing?'"

We're samsara-ing so much of the time. So *samsara*, he's saying, is not a place but a process: the tendency to keep creating worlds and then moving into them. As one world falls apart, you create another and go there. At the same time, you bump into other people who are creating their own worlds. Sound familiar? Then we wonder why we don't understand each other, why we don't even understand ourselves.

Ajahn Sumedho then takes us a step further, talking about *samsara*: "*Samsara* and *nirvana* are not places to go. They are modes of perception."

Samsara is samsara. We're *samsaring* when we're believing and looking through the perception of *sakkāy a-diṭṭhi*—of personality view, of belief in that moment in a sense of unchanging separate self. That's the basic misperception, the delusion that keeps the whole samsara going.

So that's what I want to talk about tonight. I think of this very simply as an invitation to explore, to demystify this sense of self. Because for sure, we all experience it, right? Anyone here who doesn't experience a sense of self? You wouldn't dare raise your hand even if you didn't.

Talking about not-self or *anattā* can be this really loaded concept where we think we want to think our way into it. But the Buddha, as we've said, didn't teach anything as a philosophical concept to add to the burden of all the other stuff we have to think about and try to figure out. And if you have ever—and I bet you all have—spent any time in your thoughts mulling over and trying to understand through thinking, not-self, and really experience it, how far have you gotten? I find the more one thinks about it, what gets stronger? *I* can't understand this sense of not-self. *I* must be able to think my way through it. The Buddha didn't teach any of this for philosophy, and nothing to believe, but as an invitation to explore and really see.

So I just want to offer a few tips tonight as an invitation to investigate: What is this experience in any moment when awareness notices there's an experience that's being called I, me, or mine? What is the experience? And what are the moments when there is no sense of I, me, or mine? Or as Ajahn Buddhadasa would call them, moments that are empty of sense of self.

Ajahn Sumedho, who talks about not-self and exploring self all the time, said that when he first started practice there was a sense—or I know people say—you've got to wait until meditators are pretty far along to bring it up because it's such a subtle and confusing concept. And he thinks, and I agree with him, why? Why not start with the basic misperception that's feeding all the others? Why spend twenty years

practicing from wrong understanding? Why practice for twenty years with a view, "I am going to achieve *nibbāna*"? Wrong view, completely. So why not begin to explore just this simple sense of self, this belief in personality view?

As I said, it's certainly something we experience, right? Sense of self. But often, by now, probably you all are bringing awareness to it when you notice it, because it's simply another arising and passing momentary experience. When we don't include it in the steadiness of mindfulness, when we don't examine it, the assumption is that we know: "Here's sense of self again. It's always here." We're waiting for the big bang, right? When it finally—thank God—goes away, and we really get it, and we're just floating without resistance through all the arising and passing experience, and there's no sense of self, and we're happy as clams in the water.

But it's not like that. As long as we're thinking that way, we're thinking, "Oh no, here's self again." And instead of just recognizing an arising experience, it has all this stuff around it. All I'm saying is include it in the awareness. It's a concoction. Unexamined, it's assumed to be real—"Here's a sense of self." But with careful attention, careful mindfulness, it's just another physical or mental, or possibly both at different times, experience that can simply be noticed.

Ramana Maharshi said the ego, or the sense of self, is like a ghost caused by the play of shadows. Look, examine closely, and the ghost vanishes because the ghost was never there. So also with the sense of separate self. So long as one does not look closely at it, it continues to give trouble. But when one searches for it, it is found not to exist.

Try to think your way into it—spare yourself the trouble and don't. But bring steady, steady awareness. Whenever there's a sense of self, what is it? Turn the awareness and see what it feels like. How is it showing up?

It's simply a concoction arising and passing in any particular moment. There's nothing steady state about it.

So I just want to highlight tonight a couple of the manifestations of this sense of self. But let me mention also: when you just notice self—if the awareness is kind of steady and quiet, not a big hoo-ha going on, but you're just being with things and a sense of self comes in—you can just note it. What is it? And not idea-wise, but what's the actual experience?

I spent a long couple, three months with Sayadaw U Pandita, and the noting was very steady. A sense of self would come up. Sometimes it's like an image, just a mental image—like you're seeing out from your eyes, or an image of the face, or sometimes a little sense of contraction in the chest, or whatever. So I would just note "self, self."

I tried to explain this to Sayadaw. It did not go well. There was no way. You know, it's through translators and stuff, and I was trying to explain how I just noticed this sense coming and going, and I would note it as

"self." And they got hysterical because they thought, "Oh, she thinks there's a self, and she's noting self all the time!" I gave that one up.

But really watch and see. What is it? Oh, there's self again. Turn around. What is the actual experience in the moment that's being called self? It's a physical or mental experience. That's all there is.

So one way—maybe the most obvious way—we notice the manifestation of a sense of "me" is in thoughts. Ajahn Sumedho again: "We create ourselves, our sense of self, our personality view, through our thoughts. And we cannot create an ultimately peaceful self."

It's just watching and seeing how much of your thoughts are about me. Majority, maybe? More than one or two? That's not bad or good. It's just noticing. We're telling ourselves the story of me all day long.

But how does it happen? One very simple process. As we've talked before, what's going on all day? Just the six sense contacts: feeling, perception, consciousness. All day long—seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, thinking—all day long. Have you noticed that? And that's, as we said, how the Buddha defines the world.

Now, as we go through the day, you can start to notice: how does the sense of me get concocted in a moment? It happens like this. It's just conditioning. It's just habit—deep habit, familiar habit.

But not every single sense experience is felt as me or mine, is it? I mean, that would be beyond unbearable. It's unbearable enough. But if it was every single seeing, hearing, smell—"oh me"—unbearable. So many just go by. But there are some, whatever, for whatever reason, that attention kind of unconsciously prioritizes. And there's a sense of something like you pick it out and grasp it. It's me or mine. And there's a reaction to it. It's kind of grabbed out of everything. This is me, or this is happening to me, or I feel like this about that.

And it doesn't just stop there. It goes immediately into whatever the story is—longer or shorter story about me that we tell ourselves. Just watch it. It's a basic and recurring misperception. I could give ten million examples.

Walking meditation: just walking, being with whatever arises. You're not in some big empty space, but there's no big story of me happening. And then someone cuts in front of you. In the scheme of things, that's nothing. Someone cuts in front of you. If the mind is really balanced, there might be seeing, unpleasant, an aversive thought. It goes. There's nothing. That doesn't have to create a sense of self.

But quite likely, it goes and we don't notice the unpleasant. We notice a sense of aversion. We notice the judgment about the person and how insensitive they are. "They're not respecting me. What's the matter with them?" I don't have to go further down that road, do I? It's like that.

This is not something your mind is doing because you're stupid and useless. This is just the conditioned habit. This is how these things work. So rather than getting all fussed about it, at whatever point in that process you catch it—just, "Oh, awareness, look at this. Me, me, me. They're disrespecting me. They should

be doing this. I feel like that." And then the whole story of your entire life could come in, right? In two seconds.

Just noticing how that happens, and how it can go away again so quickly. We can do this. It's kind of fun to watch. I really think this exploring of sense of self coming and going, if you get interested in it—I find it really fun. Except when it's not. But much of the time, if you're really looking at how it gets created, you start to not be able to take your personality view too seriously. You really can't.

So watch how we tell ourselves stories. We describe and define ourselves all day long, right? Not from every sense contact, but just like that little example I just gave. That's happening all the time.

Some sense experience comes. There's a reactivity, or there's a perception. There's a thought about it. There's a clinging to it or an aversion to it—which is also clinging. The whole stream of our life starts, and we don't notice. Then it changes, and we don't notice. We think it's just me having these weird emotions, but surely there's some steady me in the background.

Really looking at the process with steady awareness, you see it truly arises and passes.

I always use this example, but it's just very simple—walking again. Walking is fun. Somehow you can really see these stories coming and going while walking, with a little more sensing involved.

So you're walking. This time there's not a sense of self, just feeling the sensations or hearing, whatever. Mindfulness is steady. There's a sense of pleasantness, and you're aware of that. It's going on and suddenly, without realizing—because there have been all kinds of comings and goings of perceptions and sense contact, seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting—all of a sudden: "Wow, it's really going well." Just a thought, a pleasant thought. It could keep going, but no—it's going well.

So the grasping, the kind of pulling it out, may not be to the thought itself. It may be to the pleasant feeling. It's fast. And from there: "I'm really getting this," right?

And the whole story starts. In two seconds, you're planning either to abandon your life and enter a monastic situation, or you're planning your next three-month retreat. You're planning how you're going to meet the Dalai Lama, and he's going to be so amazed because he's never met such an amazing yogi with so much insight as you. And it takes no time. If you see it, you notice how fast it happens. But it just feels like me.

And then suddenly, "Oh my God, I am so conceited!" Another thought with a different feeling tone. And this one feels equally compelling: "This is what I always do." Whereas before you started having all the memories of all the successes in your whole life—your whole sense of "me" was in there, your whole life going to visit the Dalai Lama, everything you've done, all the amazing stuff—now suddenly it's "Oh my God, I didn't even see the greed. I didn't see the conceit in there." It feels pathetic, and you go totally down the other way. And every memory of all your failures comes flooding back, to that time in third grade

when the teacher called on you and you didn't know what seven times five was and you felt humiliated, and on and on.

And that feels just as real. They're both "me." Because we're sucked into the misperception of story, assuming this steadiness behind it. But seeing it, this is going on all day—the different worlds that Thanissaro Bhikkhu talks about. We're believing each one. When we're in an "amazing yogi" world, if we had to communicate with someone, we'd communicate in one way. If we're the worst piece of nothing in the universe in terms of trying to meditate—"Why am I even doing this?"—we communicate in a different way. And without steady awareness, we think it's the same "me." But it's just conditions concocting in that moment.

It really is like a movie. I don't know if you've had the unfortunate experience of having watched some kind of movie before you came on this retreat. You know what I mean? I was on a long retreat once—I'll spare you the title, but I had watched some adventure movie before I came. I cannot tell you how many times the thoughts, the images, the feelings of that movie would come up—Harrison Ford and all the stuff going on. I'd be noting: seeing, excitement, wanting, noticing what's happening. Then that would go away. And then the Carol movie would start: "I'm doing so well, I'm doing so bad, what's going on?" Noting, seeing, hearing.

And I realized it's just the same, exactly the same. One story, another story—one wasn't more real. That was really interesting. So I quit hating the Harrison Ford intrusions. I quit making a big deal out of the Carol narrative. It's just seeing, hearing, perception, liking, not liking, sensation. That's all that's happening—the six sense experiences.

And now the thinking mind pipes up: "Well, how am I going to function if it's nothing but the six sense experiences? And all I do is that? And I don't know if it's me? And I don't know if I'm Harrison Ford? How am I going to be able to function?"

Put that thought down. That's a worry thought. It's not coming from actual experience. It's not a problem. I have not for one moment confused myself with Harrison Ford.

Nisargadatta said, "The world, the self is so real because you think of it all the time. Stop thinking and it will dissolve into thin mist."

Just let that sit a minute and see what comes up. "There's no way I want to dissolve into thin mist. No way."

Let me concoct a whole story of me. I don't care if it's suffering—at least I'm here suffering. I don't want to dissolve into thin mist.

Well, if that's what we want, that's what we'll get. We know how to do that. We know how to concoct stories and get caught in them and spin out a whole narrative of me. We know that very well. So let's

explore how that happens and see how it stops.

Ajahn Sumedho again: "So then the self arises. I start thinking about myself, my feelings, my memories, my past, my fears and desires, and the whole world arises around Ajahn Sumedho. It takes off into orbit. My views, my feelings, and my opinions—I can get caught into that world, that view of me that's arising in consciousness. But if I recognize that, if awareness recognizes that's what's happening, then the refuge is no longer in being a person. I'm not taking refuge in being a personality or my views and opinions. And so in that moment, the world of Ajahn Sumedho ends."

Just explore that. And it's interesting to consider not taking refuge in my personality. We do this, you know. We may think that we really dislike our personality. There may be a lot of things about it we wish were different. But just notice how, in a way, we take refuge. Comfort is familiar.

So I let go. The world of Ajahn Sumedho ends. It does not mean Ajahn Sumedho dies and the world ends, or that I'm unconscious. In the Buddhadharma, the world is the world that's created in consciousness. That's why we can be living in different worlds. The world of Ajahn Sumedho is not going to be the same as the world you create. And that's just what Pañasara was saying. But that world arises and ceases. Our refuge then is in this awareness, rather than in trying to sustain refined experiences in consciousness as our refuge, because you can't do it. Our refuge is just in this conscious awareness.

So getting interested in seeing how the world of you arises, what it's like, and how it ceases. And another world arises, and it's not the same world, and it's not the same you. Joseph Goldstein has lots of good one-liners, and he used to say often, "We're making it all up." And it's true.

Here's another example, perhaps from that same retreat. It illustrates how there can be a sense contact, the clinging to it, the identifying with it, and the whole world of memories that follows. One day, very simply, it was about this time of year probably. I was sitting in my room and outside there were crickets—you know, these little insects in trees—which for some reason in my mind are associated with autumn and nostalgia and things passing.

So this whole mood came up: memory, crickets, and different autumn periods in my life when things were ending. This kind of sadness, but a little bit sweet, and all about me and my life. And then it went into loneliness and despair and the crickets. I was totally in it.

And then awareness came in, just noticing. Noticing each mood, noticing the thoughts, noticing each time the cricket sounded, there was that connection. Oh, yeah—going into the whole story.

So then I thought, well, let's just consciously shift it. What I actually did was this: the cricket would sound, and I'd change the thought consciously. "How lovely. Here it is, the autumn. And the trees are beautiful. And I'm in this really protected space, practicing the Dhamma. How wonderful!" I don't remember exactly, but I went into some story in the other direction. And it became just as real. The moods came with it.

The feeling tones came with it. The happiness came with it. The gratitude came with it. The actual situation was just hearing and the perception of crickets, and then this whole story arose. They were equally powerful—or equally empty, whichever way you want to look at it. I thought, "Wow. And I go through life believing all this junk." Oh my God, I'm sad. But the crickets—it's nothing but crickets and hearing, pleasant or unpleasant, and some thoughts coming that are memory. That's it. And then they go away.

Can we bear to look in this way? I tell you, it's so much more freeing.

I've been noticing lately—just as an aside—noticing in my daily life that whenever I'm speaking or acting from a strong sense of self, it's suffering. The only time I'm suffering, I check in and there's always some strong sense of "me" going on that I'm not seeing. And I'm responding from that. I'm not saying this as a judgment. It's just like, "Wow, yeah, right." This misperception really causes havoc in the mind, in the world. And it's habits, driven from misperceptions, driven from greed, from wanting, from just not seeing clearly, not looking clearly.

And then there are the personality habits, because we all think, "Well, my personality is different from your personality." It is. We have different habits. But that doesn't make it more real or true or a sense of self. Just as we each have different physical manifestations, we also have different mental habits based on all of our conditioning and experiences, which are slightly different. But it's still arising from conditioning and cause and effect—this whole concoction arising in a moment. That we can see.

So it's about getting interested in seeing personality habits. But we don't have to fear them. We don't have to identify with them. We just notice when we are. "No, but that's me. I have to work this one out. I have to get rid of this, really see through it. And when I no longer have this aversive tendency toward this person, then I can begin to make some progress." But an hour later, there's no aversion arising to that person. That doesn't count, though, because you're carrying around in your mind, "I'm always this aversive person toward them."

Noticing it comes and goes. We don't have to always just get sucked down in. We can bring awareness and see how it's working.

I was listening to Anam Thubten, who's a Tibetan Lama living in Richmond in the Bay Area of California. During COVID, when I was home more—I mean, I live much of the time in California, and he's just over the bay. Do I ever go to see him? No. I went once. Once. I think I met Walt there, the only time I ever went. But I started listening to him and thought, "Well, he's really great. I really like him a lot." He starts very simply and then it would get, to me, quite profound at some point. And he gave this example that to me fits in here—maybe it doesn't to you.

But as we're developing steady mindfulness, we see that the object is always changing.

We learn not to look for stability, not to look for refuge or a sense of self-worth in any object. Not to look

for self-worth in personality patterns. Not to look for stability in things that are constantly changing. That frees up the clinging, and the awareness becomes available to really be present with things as they're coming and going.

So this is an example Mingyur Rinpoche gave that I liked—seeing a habit we might not normally notice. He was saying, especially in these challenging times (this was last year when everything was so intense), we are easily overwhelmed, pulled into a whirlpool of worry, of fear, of anger, self-blame, blaming others. All of this is swirling in the world. There's so much going on, and we're easily pulled into it. And whether we turn the blame inward or outward, it's the same thing.

He says, notice when this is the case, when we're sucked into this—it's just a habit. Stronger or weaker in different people. Maybe some people get sucked into fear, maybe some into worry, maybe some into blame, whatever it is. But notice: when we lose touch with present moment awareness, we lose touch with our natural dignity, with love and compassion.

So he says we practice to re-recognize awareness. Sound familiar? Just to re-recognize awareness—not to fix all this stuff. To re-recognize awareness and its access to our deeper nature. It opens us to the potential for kindness and compassion. And that's what we can then offer to the world. This is guidance for people in daily life. It's not about trying to go in and fix everything, but rather seeing when the habits of attention draw us into "Oh my God, what's going to happen with this? Oh my God, who's to blame?" Whatever it is—just rediscover the awareness. "Oh, that's what's happening."

This seems like magic sometimes, but it's not that magic makes everything okay. What I've noticed is that in moments when I'm operating from a sense of self or sucked into a habit pattern, the experience is one of narrowness, one of unpleasant suffering. In the moment of tuning into awareness—"Oh, that's what's happening"—to a greater or lesser degree depending on how clear the awareness is, that clinging lets go. And then compassion for the suffering people are going through just naturally arises, instead of "Who's to blame? How do we fix it?"

You know how sometimes in news media, something terrible has just happened to someone and they stick a microphone in their face and ask, "Who do you blame for this?" I've seen that so many times. It's heartbreaking.

So, just re-recognize awareness. That's why we practice—to recognize its access to compassion and kindness and clear seeing.

Ajahn Buddhadasa has a book called *Heartwood of the Bodhi Tree*, translated from Thai, which I read many years ago and really enjoyed. It's all about anattā, not-self, looking at it and exploring it. And he has a wonderful line: "Self, the sense of self, is simply a condition that arises when there is grasping and clinging in the mind."

So simple. The sense of self is simply a condition that arises when there's grasping and clinging in the

mind. Clinging to what? Anything. Physical sensation, an image, a memory, any of the five sense experiences. Grasping at perception. Grasping at vedanā. Grasping at intention. It doesn't have to be a huge grasping. Just that person walking in front of me—"They're being aggressive." That's the perception. "Yeah, they are."

Don't tell me they're not being aggressive—that's clinging to it. Or perhaps the perception shifts: they're not aggressive, but they're completely deluded and mindless. That's a perception. Or "I'm completely selfish"—that's a perception we cling to. But you can see how we create the world with our thoughts, with this moment of clinging.

A condition arises when there's grasping and clinging in the mind, concocted from any experience. As Ajahn Buddhadasa said, this concoction of self arises hundreds of times in a day—birth of self. But then equally, hundreds of times in a day, there's death of the sense of self. Many, many moments throughout the day there is either the letting go—not even letting go, that sounds like someone doing it—but the dissolving of the sense of self. It's just seeing, "Oh yeah, it's gone." And then noticing there's no sense of self in that moment. Hundreds of times a day. It's just an activity of mind.

We can notice this, though you may not always think, "Right, attachment to perception, sense of self arising." It won't be that clear much of the time—it might emerge from a lot of thinking. But sometimes, for me at least, I can often feel a sense of contraction in the mind that comes with clinging. It's not always sense of self, but often. I can just feel that.

And noticing the effect when we're coming from sense of self—it's something to look at and see for yourself. I'm giving my opinion, but don't try to make your experience match what I'm saying. Just look and see. It's like a narrowing of the world. When it's about "me," of course, everything starts from here and refers back to here. I don't know if you've noticed that.

I'll use an example I often use. It's Joseph's example, but he's not here, so I can borrow it. Very simple. He was standing in line on retreat—second in line. That's essential to the story. He was second in line; someone else was first. The bell rang, the person ahead of him stepped forward, but the lid was still on the big pot. So the person lifted up the lid, but it dropped and hit the floor. You can imagine the noise it made in the silence.

And you all are wonderful here—you don't have huge lines for lunch. We really notice and appreciate it. We're putting it down to your incredible practice and dedication. But sometimes on other retreats, people are standing there for fifteen minutes in line, waiting for the meal. So there's a big line, then this huge crash.

Joseph says—he's tall, right?—so he stands up and notices his first thought was that he wanted to turn and say, "It wasn't me." That's what we do. It's all about me. A real narrowing of the world.

And when that's not there, the beautiful qualities naturally arise. A simple example from my own life:

I was sitting quietly at home when I heard—someone must have told me—about a really good, kind thing a friend had done for someone else. At the time I heard it, clearly the mind was in a "me" mood, a little down, a little negative about myself. Just in this subtle, self-judging framework. So it was about me.

I heard the story, and my first thought was: "Wow, I should have done that. I didn't think to do that. Why didn't I do that?" This comparing, this māna in its negative form, all about me.

Somehow it happened that later—not the next moment but the next day or something—I heard a similar or the same story fresh. I wasn't thinking about it at all. But my heart and mind was just really present and awake, and there was no me-ing going on. And the immediate mental state that arose was muditā. "Wow, how lovely! How fantastic that they did that!" Such a world of difference.

Now, don't take that and get down on yourself: "Oh God, I'm so concerned with me." That's just the same thing. But notice the truth of the fact that when there's clinging around "about me," the stories give rise to more suffering. When that's not there, the natural response of heart and mind is compassion, or appreciative joy, or equanimity.

We can trust this. As someone said, wisdom inclines toward the wholesome. It's not like we have to remember and do it. Our job is just to keep refreshing the awareness. Wisdom inclines to the wholesome. If we could trust this and quit trying to fix everything all the time, it would be so much more pleasant. The whole practice would move along. But that's not how it is, and we have to deal with how it is.

So back to Ajahn Buddhadasa—just noticing the arising birth of self hundreds of times a day, death of self hundreds of times a day. He has a whole section on what the translation calls "moments of voidness" or emptiness. But what he's specifically talking about is moments of consciousness when there's no sense of self arising.

This is not some amazing esoteric experience. Ajahn Buddhadasa says it's truly normal and natural—hundreds of times in a day when there's no wanting going on, when we're not distracted but really present. There are many, many moments of no sense of self arising. It's important for our steady awareness to also notice these. We get so distracted or pulled into the sense contacts and what we think about it and me—that's the habit. Yet it's really normal that there are many times when that's not going on.

The sense of self is a process, not a thing that's here all the time. Again, Ajahn Buddhadasa talks about it as a verb: *ahaṅkāra* and *mamaṅkāra*—that's Pali. I-ing and my-ing. That's what's going on: I-ing and my-ing. A process that arises and goes away. We can just notice that like we notice anything else.

The next step is recognizing and trusting how normal and natural these moments are—what he calls voidness. It's not such a great word, because now you're going to think there's nothing happening and it's empty. It's not that. It's just the absence of a sense of self.

But he talks about generating a contentment with this voidness. And guess what is one of the doorways in? Our old friend, neutral vedana. Nothing special is going on. Can we generate a contentment with calm? Nothing's happening. Or are we uncomfortable? We've talked about this before—that sense of nothing's happening and the habit of "let's cook something up." Because there's no me here going on. As soon as we think that, we've already cooked something up.

So just starting to notice. You don't even notice a sense of emptiness of self, but just nothing—just really present. And there's a sense of so often waiting for the next worthwhile thing to arise. As we've said before, how often the next birth of me, the habit of mine, is so uncomfortable—even just for a minute of waiting—that it creates, and I've seen my mind do this plenty of times, a whole story, a suffering story, of something that might happen at some point in the future when you go home, if this person's there and if they did that, and if you say that and then they say that. And then you're totally in anger. But that's better. At least I'm angry. We'd rather be there and angry than in just this moment of simple is-ness. Nothing going on.

So just have that in the back of your mind. You can take an interest—take an interest in the moments between births of sense of self. Sometimes you can, this is just an example, but just have a sense of space. Notice if being with some object in the sitting and it vanishes, and you feel like for dear life you have to get back to the breath immediately. God forbid there should be a moment of—no, I'm losing it! Back to the breath, back to the breath. Nope, nope, nope. That's helpful—helpful technique—but not when it's coming from the sense of "oh no, there's nothing." It's awareness, simplicity, just being like this.

You might notice space between thoughts, space between activities. Notice when you're eating. Can you just let your fork rest for a tenth of a second before you load it up and shove it in again? Just a moment of space. The minute you finish eating, you have to jump up and go do something. I'm not saying you do, but just notice this sense to fill up the space. Just start to incline the mind to notice the space in the room, space around thoughts, space between activities. Just a chance to notice the simplicity of awareness without needing to complicate it. Normally we don't notice the emptiness because we're so involved with experience and concocting thoughts and stuff about it—views, interpretations.

So just don't make it a thing, because that's already me doing something. But just notice when nothing special is going on. "Ah, emptiness." Okay, now that's a sense of me catching. Fine, that's the next thing. Let's notice. Nothing outside of the sense of steady awareness.

As Ajahn Sumedho says, taking the refuge just in a simple moment-to-moment awareness—not in personality, not in particular experience, not in getting rid of particular experience, but in just, "Ah, it's like this now." Appreciating those moments of awareness. And more and more, it starts to come in. There's already many moments when there's no sense of self, but a lot of times we don't really notice them because we're used to noticing what's louder and more vivid. So inclining to the neutral, inclining to the sense of space, that simplicity of non-concoction.

I read this before, but just two quotations. From Mingyur Rinpoche: "It's not dull, empty void. We start to recognize the sense of peace that arises from the stability of awareness and which is not dependent on the absence or presence of unpleasant or pleasant experience."

And then just one last little thing from a Thai laywoman from the last century, Upasika Kee. There's just one little book of her. Very strong practitioner. Tough. She was tough. Anyway, she just says: "What is, is."

What is not, is not. There's no need to add anything extra. If we could just do that, our heart and mind would be at peace.

So thank you for your kind attention. Let's just sit quietly for a moment.

May our sincere motivation to practice, to awaken our hearts and minds from suffering—may the beneficial energies created by that be shared with all beings everywhere. May all beings live free from suffering and delusion.

So just have fun playing with this.

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