Anattā: Investigating the Misperception of Self

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 57:59

So tonight I want to talk about the third of the three characteristics. If you thought I was going to talk about thanksgiving and gratitude, forget it. I'm talking about anattā—really more about investigating this idea of self, this sense of self. Think about this as a little fireside chat, not some big philosophical disquisition.

As I said with the other two characteristics of existence, anicca (impermanence) and dukkha (unsatisfactoriness), the same is true with anattā. It's not that it's some different reality that we need to achieve. It's just a description of how things actually are. Our confusion comes about through recognizing wrongly, recognizing inaccurately. Those of you who were here may remember when I talked about the inverted perceptions—that we see things opposite from how they are.

With anattā, in my personal experience (and mostly I'm just talking from personal experience, not declaring this is how it is, but hopefully just getting you a little interested to keep exploring), with this sense of not-self, it's not so much that it's a philosophical concept that we need to understand and discuss and remember and debate. Basically, that doesn't really get us very far.

It's a sense of seeing—I think with anattā more than the other two—that the sense we have, and we do have a very real sense of "me here now," is worthy of investigation. It's not like we don't feel that. We feel it. It seems really true. And because it's not investigated, we just assume it's true. It's a basic misperception that's so frequent and familiar and cozy, kind of comfortable in a twisted way, that we just keep on believing it.

In this way, the whole sense of recognizing not-self, whenever we first start talking about it—as I mentioned—the Buddha didn't seem to teach for us to memorize more philosophical concepts. At the time he was teaching in India, there were clearly lots of wanderers and ascetics with all different points of view and different spiritual backgrounds. They really went around debating each other quite a bit, very philosophically. The Buddha was really not teaching to add another line to the debate.

There were even times when people would come to him—I mean, he taught about not-self, "this is not mine, this I am not, this is not myself." But if we just take that up as a philosophical view, as one of my teachers said, people go around saying, "This is not me. This is not myself." But it's *they* saying, "This is not myself." They're just throwing it in as another line. "Oh, I know this thought is not me. I know this thought is not me." And they don't really look carefully.

The Buddha really wasn't teaching to try and get us to have another philosophical concept. There are even

suttas where some of these wanderers would come and ask him questions. Even though he taught very clearly over and over about not-self—that none of the sense experiences, no aspect of nāma-rūpa can be thought of as me or mine—there are suttas where wanderers come. There's one in particular who shows up a lot named Vacchagotta. He always shows up and walks away shaking his head and looking confused. Just so you know, not everyone who met the Buddha got it. Plenty of people would walk away going, "Okay, if you say so," then they'd go off.

One time this Vacchagotta came and said to the Buddha, "Is there a self?" And the Buddha remained silent. Then he asked, "Is there not a self?" And the Buddha remained silent. So Vacchagotta went away dissatisfied and confused.

Ānanda said, "Why didn't you answer him?"

The Buddha said, "Well, if I said that there was a self, I would be siding with all the people who are eternalists, because that's the background he comes from, and that wouldn't be helpful. But if I said there's no self, then I would be taking the side of what he would think of as the annihilationists—'this self of mine is going to be destroyed'—and that would also not be true."

Then he said, just on the personal level, "If I said to him there is a self," he asked Ānanda, "would that be commensurate with what I've always taught and what I've known, that no aspect of nāma-rūpa can be considered a self?"

And Ānanda said, "No, that wouldn't be true."

And the Buddha said, but if I said to him there is no self, then he wouldn't understand it. He'd go away thinking, "Oh, so it seems this self of mine must come to an end." And he would be even more confused. So I just didn't tell him anything.

This story shows just how confusing this topic can be. And in talking about it, I find that the more one tends to think about it, for most people, it's just not helpful. We can't think our way into this because it's a misperception. So what helps clarify the perception? Just what we've talked about all the time—the steadiness of mindfulness when the mind, the citta, the consciousness in a moment isn't clouded by wanting, isn't clouded by aversion, isn't clouded by confusion.

Of course, the catch-22 is that the sense of self is itself a manifestation of confusion and clinging. But still, we can begin to observe that itself, rather than just stopping looking. When there's a sense of self, how do I get rid of it?

When we begin talking about this again, often besides trying to think your way through it, some people go into, "Okay, I'm waiting for the big blowout experience of anatta, of no self." Finally, like that last way he said, Vacchagotta would think, "Finally this self of mine will be completely destroyed, and I won't have to deal with all this craziness anymore. And I'm waiting for that." So now there's self. But when anatta really

comes, or I get there, or whatever way the mind says it, then there won't be self. You get that sense of positing something that we're waiting for to go away. And we're waiting for the big bang for it to happen, too.

So I want to say, for most people, forget about it. Quit waiting for the big bang. Quit waiting for what's here now to go away, and turn around and see what's actually true. That's, again, what I said before, what I love about the Buddha's teaching. Liberation comes not from getting rid of something, but from seeing how things are arising in this moment accurately. Accurately.

If we're afraid of our sense of self, if we hate it when ego arises, well, then we're not going to be able to recognize it accurately, are we? We're already in contention with it. But we can just begin to explore it the same as any other arising experience, because that's all it is—another arising experience.

So it's neither annihilation, getting rid of something, where everything just becomes a dull grayness. "If there's no me, who decides what to eat for lunch?" All those questions come up when we take questions the next morning after an anatta talk. "Well, if there's no me, who decided to come to this retreat?" And all that kind of stuff. "If there's no me, how am I going to function in the world?" And see, all of that comes from the thought that there is a me that has to go away.

But this is the thing. There is no solid self now, before, tomorrow, or ever. There's nothing to lose but confusion. There's nothing to be afraid of. Not that we're in control of whether we're afraid, because we're not in control of anything.

Sayadaw U Pandita said once to me in an interview—I forget what was happening, obviously something was going on I didn't like, or I was afraid—he said, "Well, are you making that happen?"

I said, "Well, no, I can't make it happen."

He said, "That's right. It's out of control. That's anatta, out of control."

I thought, oh, that's a nice definition. I like that quite a bit, because the sense of control is always about some "me," you know, the little person in the head. Like, did you ever see *Men in Black*? I don't know what was coming into my mind, but there's this little being, this little alien inside somebody's head that's running the body. And I thought, yeah, that's really so much what it feels like—just in here pulling all the levers, "I'm the one."

Well, there's no one in there doing that.

So really, it's this sense of misperception, of not recognizing accurately. There's a sutta somewhere where the Buddha compares the way consciousness works to a magic show. When we don't see how the magic is done—like someone on the side of the road performing magic or working puppets—when we don't see how it's done, it's fascinating, amazing. And then when you see behind the scenes how the magic is done, it loses its power. It isn't magic anymore. It loses the mystery.

The way that our thoughts and emotions and associations and clinging all come together around any particular moment of consciousness—the sense door contact and awareness—the way that all comes together and creates this seemingly real, palpable, and somehow to us unchanging sense of self is just like that. It's like a magic show. And it seems so solid only because we don't really look. We don't let that arise into a space of awareness like anything else.

Ramana Maharshi said the idea of self—or he used the word ego; I'm not using ego just because that brings us into psychological terminology where the sense of an ego structure as a way to navigate conventional reality is very useful, so I don't want to confuse things—but he said the sense of self, the idea of self, is like a ghost caused by the play of shadows. Look closely and the ghost vanishes. The ghost was never there. So also with this sense of solid self: so long as one does not look closely at it, it continues to give trouble. But when one looks for it, it is found not to exist.

So it should be so simple, shouldn't it? Why it's so complicated, I don't really know. But that is really the key. It seems to exist because it's not investigated. Investigated really with mindfulness, with dhamma vicaya—one of the seven factors of enlightenment—investigation, interest. Not investigated with fear or greed or trying to make experience match some philosophical concept. But really, when the sense of self is there, turn around and notice. Just bring your awareness to it the same way you would a sound or a sight.

Because for sure—I mean, I do, and I don't think I'm the only one—the sense of me, self, is a palpable experience that arises, oh, say ten million times a day, right? We know there's a sense of me, or of me watching, or me hearing, or me thinking. Or else it's my pain or my thought. But often that felt sense of me—we're sort of aware of it, we have sort of mindfulness with it, we're really aware of it—but we tend not to turn around and actually notice: sense of me is like this. Feel or notice in this moment what am I calling "sense of me"? Don't bring in the thoughts, but bring in this quality of interest, of attention.

And for me, it could be just a little physical feeling at that moment. Another time, it might be an image. Another time, it might be like a sense of an image, like of looking out through eyes—that's just another image. It could be all kinds of things. And the thing to notice is this sense of self, however you're experiencing it—we assume, without looking, we just assume, "Oh, here it is. How am I going to get rid of it? Here's the ego again causing trouble." We just assume it's some solid thing, instead of turning around and noticing as it arises, noticing as it passes.

But often right here is where our awareness snaps shut, where our perception is inaccurate. So here our practice is first to just become aware: sense of self is here right now, in whatever way—there can be different ways. And then just to keep on being aware, being mindful of that, just the same as you would of anything else. Anything else. Keep on looking. Because what keeps the magic show going is lack of attention. And lack of attention leads to inaccurate misperception.

So again, it's not that something that's here has to go away, but rather we recognize it a different way. Conventional and ultimate reality are both still here. It's not like we stopped existing.

The example I often use—I've used something similar in another talk—is about perception, accurate perception. I don't know if it's so popular anymore, but a few years ago there were all these posters and books of something I think they called Magic Eye. Each page would just be symbols of different colors, maybe red and yellow. If you looked at it, it didn't have any picture of anything—just geometrical shapes all blended together. They'd have a whole book of these different ones. If you just looked at it flat out like that, without looking very carefully, without a lot of attention, that's all you saw.

But what was magic, so-called magic, about them is that if you looked in the right way—which was sort of steady but not focusing, not looking for something, but relaxed and present and steady—your perception would kind of shift. And suddenly in that field of just symbols, just shapes, would suddenly jump out what looked like a three-dimensional picture of something. Maybe of a spaceship, or maybe of an elephant, or maybe of two hockey players, or whatever. What it was was usually pretty mundane, not that interesting. But it was always fascinating for people to see how this flat bunch of colors suddenly had within it what really looked so real—a three-dimensional representation of people or animals. And then if you kind of looked away or stopped that steady, relaxed focus, that would go away again and it would just be the flat image.

So you couldn't say that that representation of the hockey players wasn't there. As far as we can tell, it's there all the time, right? But you don't perceive it all the time. Some people could never perceive it. They just never got the knack of how to look right. You'd tell them, "Well, there's these hockey players in there." And they'd say, "Well, I can't see it. I can't see it. I can't see it." The harder they tried, the less likely they were to see it—looking for the hockey players, everything just getting tight. But even when you know how, sometimes you're looking in a certain way and you see it, other times not. It's just the flatness. So both ways of perceiving are available in that particular experience.

To me, it's a little bit analogous to what it's been like in my experience with this sense of self, with identification or non-identification. I'll say in a later minute what I mean by identification, because that's a word we throw around. "I'm identified with that." Well, what the heck do you really mean when you say that? It's something that's really easy to say, but what's the actual moment-to-moment experience? What are you really experiencing when you say "I'm identified with that"?

So both pieces are there. That's been my experience—that the sense of experience is coming and going, including the sense of self. And it's just what it is, coming and going. And then other times, it's the same experience, but the perception has shifted. And somewhere there's that sense of ownership or beingship. And everything's a lot stickier, isn't it? It really does start to be a problem. Or you think it's really fantastic—it's not a problem. And then that goes away. And then it's a problem.

But in one way, it's just so simple. Stuff's just happening. And the same things are happening. And you function just as well as ever—frankly, better. And then it just switches. And it's me. It's mine. It's rough. It's ugh. You're back with that dukkha axle hole grinding against the cart.

It's not that there was no self and now there is a self. It's just not recognizing accurately.

And then how do we respond? Back to that moment of perception—how an experience is perceived, how it's named, how it's labeled. That colors how we think about it, how we view it, and then that becomes our description, our view that describes and defines our world, without even recognizing that's what's happening.

This is really what happens in terms of a whole sense of personality view, which is one aspect of sense of self. It's not the only sense of self; there's a more subtle sense of self too. But this sense of perception and then how we label it leads to how we think about things, leads to our emotions, leads to our actions, leads to a deeper and deeper story about ourselves. Have you ever noticed that?

And it can be just in regard to anything, anything. You can walk outside and it feels cold. It can just be coldness—just unpleasant or pleasant or whatever you think about cold. But you can also walk outside: "Oh, it's cold. Oh, it's November. Why is it so cold? I didn't bring the right clothes. I never bring the right clothes. And I have this particular physical condition that really can't be good for me to be here." And then all the memories and all of that. "And look at those other people—they have the right clothes. How come I never do bring the right thing? What's the matter with me anyway?"

This is mundane. But how many times a day might we do that? It goes just from "it's cold and not so pleasant" to the whole story of our life, seemingly the whole story of our life. Five minutes later, it could be a completely different story of your life. Walking by—"Wow, look at that nice lunch."

And here it is Thanksgiving. God knows what you all went through about Thanksgiving, being such a big family holiday. It's a day that can often just trigger a lot of thinking about stuff. And now you're sitting there thinking, "I didn't think anything. What's the matter with me? I'm not a good family person." It's hopeless if you're going to take all this seriously.

But this is the sense of concocting a whole story—not just the sense of self, that little clinging, but the whole personality view, the whole story of self. This is a whole personality view, which is a sense of self, but also more elaborated than the more subtle senses of self that arise all the time.

Ajahn Sumedho said: "So then the self arises." The cold, the food, the whatever. "I start thinking about myself, my feelings, my memories, my past, my fears, my 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 arises in consciousness."

And that's a view based on perception, based on thoughts. It turns into a view that arises in consciousness. "But if I know that, then my refuge is no longer in being a person. I'm not taking refuge in being a personality or my views and opinions. Then when I let go, the world of Ajahn Sumedho ends."

So just notice how many times in a day the world of whoever we are arises, based on anything. And rather

than hating it, explore it just like that. See how it arises. See what makes it. See what that sense of self is. And notice how it ends when we take refuge in awareness.

He says: "It doesn't mean Ajahn Sumedho dies and the world ends, or that I'm unconscious. In Buddhadharma, the world is the world that we create in consciousness." That's why we can be living in different worlds. Have you ever noticed that? It's like we're all living in our own little world. The world of Ajahn Sumedho is not going to be the same as the world you create. But that world arises and ceases. And that which is aware of the world arising and ceasing transcends the world.

"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. So trusting, resting in this conscious awareness is what I refer to as coming home, or our real home."

So just in simple terms, when we notice this whole psychiatry, personality view, identity view arising in a moment, or we wake up and it's well arisen, instead of getting into "Oh my God, and me, and this and that, and I've got to change my personality and then I'll be better"—that's the same thing. Just that Tai Chi move of recognizing: as soon as you see all that personality stuff, just the recognition of it is mindfulness. It's awareness.

So he's saying you don't have to get rid of it even. Just let your refuge shift to the mindfulness, to the awareness. And if that sounds too highfalutin, just appreciate the mindfulness in that moment. Mindfulness of sakkāya-diṭṭhi, fine. Mindfulness of the whole story of Carol and her whole life arising out of coldness—fine. It's a story just like any other story. We don't have to hate them. We don't have to take that one so seriously as "me," especially when you notice it changes ten thousand times a day.

Quite some years ago, I was doing a couple months retreat. I was doing the practice, and you know how the story of you just keeps going and going, even when it doesn't spring up with something cold—just that commenting: "Now I'm doing this, now I'm doing that, now I'm walking, well now I'm walking badly, now I'm going to do this," and on and on, until it comes up stronger and then your whole past and future appears.

I happened to see a movie just before I came on the retreat. I don't know if you've ever had the experience, but whatever movie or song or whatever you might have had the misfortune to listen to or watch before a retreat—let's hope you liked it, because you're going to see it and hear it again for quite a while. So I had watched The Fugitive with Harrison Ford, this kind of thriller.

After some weeks on the retreat, this Fugitive story would come, and I'd notice it, and then get going on Carol's story. And after a while, I realized they were exactly the same. I mean, the stories were different, but the quality—the Fugitive story would start, it'd come in image, there'd be Harrison Ford, there'd be the emotions, the music, and that would go on for a while. The reactions in my mind would go on, and that would stop. Then practice, practice. Then Carol would come up—"Oh my God, and why is this..."—and that

would go on for a while with the emotions and the thoughts, then that would stop.

After a while, I realized they were exactly the same process. Exactly. This isn't a metaphor—exactly the same process. And it was really quite funny.

And the Carol story, really, it's pretty boring, isn't it? I mean, you know my Carol story's boring. But your own stories—this isn't anything you say to me in interviews, I'm not commenting on my discussions with you—but really, isn't most of your own story pretty boring? Over and over and over. So The Fugitive was actually a little bit better, a little bit more exciting. But it's really on that level. This is what we call, and this is the whole sense of, personality view.

I'll say something else interesting about this, and then talk about the step underneath it that starts the sense of self in a moment. Ajahn Sumedho talked about one time when some teachers were meeting with him, and he was discussing teaching. He had taught for twenty or thirty years in Thailand to Thai people—he speaks Thai—and then he was living in England and taught a lot to Westerners.

So he said at this point—and maybe he would have changed his mind later—he felt that the biggest hindrance for Western practitioners and meditators is a kind of self-doubt regarding their own insight into awareness, a self-doubt regarding the liberating experiences that Westerners had with awareness. And not like the big bang, everything's over—quit looking for that. But just moments, like the example I just gave of "Oh, that's the same process!" And awareness of that is really quite liberating. You don't have to stop it. You just shift the refuge.

And he says Westerners have so much doubt, self-doubt, about their own insights into awareness. This is his opinion—he believes that's partially because our personalities are so strong and our belief in and reliance on our personalities is so strong. The personality, he says, is so often a reference point.

Think about it. When you're having doubt, how often does it become, "I couldn't really do this, because of past history or whatever." But there was a moment where it really seemed like you got it—that there's nobody here doing it, that it's just so simple. There was a taste of freedom. And then the next day or the next year, "Well, that couldn't have really happened. It must have been something I read, because clearly, here I am with my personality, and it's still so steady. There's no way I could step outside of it." We just so believe it. We use it as our reference point.

So he says we keep getting caught back into our personality. If it's a choice, basically he's saying, between really having confidence in awareness and having confidence in our limited personality, nine times out of ten we go for the personality. It's just what we really believe. I just think that's interesting. I'm throwing that out as something to chew on. I'm not saying I'm sure if it's true or not, but I think it's very interesting.

In some ways, this is the easier part of the sense of self to notice—when it's arising and how it's created. Easy just because it's a bit more obvious. But again, if we want to really explore for each of us the sense of self, just to get interested in exploring it, we can go back to something that Ajahn Buddhadasa says. Over

and over he said that the sense of self is merely a condition that arises when there is grasping and clinging in the mind. That's it. Merely a condition that arises when there's grasping and clinging in the mind. I have a friend who said that translates to, "I want, I need, therefore I am."

The sense of clinging can be really strong, but the much more subtle clinging that can arise around any sense experience—just the little contraction of clinging, of wanting—that can be quite subtle. And from that, it becomes like, "This is my experience. This is my unpleasant feeling, the cold weather. This is my thought. I am this thought. I am this feeling." It's not telegraphed so clearly as that, just kind of a little contraction around it.

If I go outside and there's a contraction of cold and it's unpleasant, it's not so clear. I can say it in retrospect—it's unpleasant, I don't like that unpleasant. Right there, there's the contraction, the clinging to the unpleasant as mine, as me. And then from that, the aversion and the whole sakkāya-diṭṭhi starts.

But there are other times I can go outside—you get it that I don't like the cold, right?—I can go outside and it's cold. You see it and it's just cold. It's just cold. There's nothing else about it. There's not a sense of me-ing or my-ing about it. There's not a sense of liking or not liking. It's just what it is. It's just not a problem. It's nothing, because there's nothing to compare it to. There's not this little sense of clinging that creates a sense of self. So merely a condition that arises and passes.

This is, of course, the whole of dependent origination, which I'm not about to try and explain right now. But to say it very briefly and succinctly, the chain of twelve links that the Buddha described over and over: when there's not wisdom in the mind, when there's ignorance and there's not clear seeing—I won't go through the whole thing, but the ones we can see most easily are how mind and matter leads to contact, that moment of sense experience, feeling. Say it's coolness, staying with the cold—the body that can feel, and consciousness that's aware.

When those three come together—the body that can feel, and consciousness that's aware—that's called contact. Any sense experience we have: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, thinking. Every second, some sense contact is arising, and consciousness is recognizing that. Mindfulness is recognizing that recognition.

But with contact, right away there's a feeling—pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. The mind feels that contact. When it's not recognized, that often leads into *taṇhā*, this kind of thirst. It's either leaning into the pleasant or pushing away the unpleasant. And this is all really fast.

Then it goes on. That leaning into creates a kind of grasping—grasping to hold onto something, grasping to push it away. This is still really fast. And that grasping leads to, in terms of the dependent origination, *bha va*, which is having and being, into birth, into sickness, old age, and death.

That can be thought of as lifetimes. But the way I want to talk about it—and I'm coming from Buddhadasa again here—he's talking very specifically about exploring how the sense of self is merely a condition

arising when there's grasping and clinging in the mind. It takes all the personal out of it. It takes all the problem out of it. It's a conditioned arising like everything. We can just explore it.

So he describes contact, feeling tone—say it's pleasant—then the *taṇhā*, the leaning into. And then the grasping—Buddhadasa calls it the feeling of I and mine. And the feeling of I and mine leads to *bhava*, which he calls having and being. You see, we're getting more and more real. And then comes birth, *jāti*—bi rth of the sense of self.

And then sickness, old age, and death—the death of that sense of self. Thousands of times a day.

I'll give you a very simple example from a long time ago. I was on a retreat at IMS—this retreat center. We used to have, where you go to take the mugs, back in the good old days, all different kinds of mugs. Any kind of mug people had bought and left here—we loved all those old mugs. Now they're all exactly the same and green, but anyway, there were all these different mugs in different sizes. I would come in, get a mug, just have my tea and go. I was, I think, a little bit proud that I wasn't getting caught in it at all.

Then one day I came in, grabbed a mug, and as I was getting my tea, I thought, "Wow, this mug just really feels perfect in my hand. I love this mug." And it's like, "I want to use this mug."

Right then—that was the contact. It was pleasant. The feeling moved to grasping. And right away, the sense of having and being. I have this mug, and I'm becoming someone who wants this mug. It was birth of the sense of self right then—me and my mug.

Just a little thing. It's not like something we hate, but to really feel it—the difference between coming in, getting a mug, having my tea, and going, versus coming in thinking, "Ah, this mug! How can I keep it? Should I get—no, okay, never mind, put it back. I'm not going to keep it." Put it down. Then I walked away and it was all gone. Death of that sense of self.

It's just a little thing. Next time I came in though, I sort of looked for that mug. And it was there. The whole thing started already. The whole thing was there—the sense of self. You see, it's not a horrible thing, but it complicates everything. There was the birth of self as soon as I saw that mug. I picked it up and sat down.

And then I really started planning: how can I save it? I'll take it back to my room. I mean, there are plenty of mugs. I know other people save things, and on and on. And then I started thinking about it. Well, what does that mean? That means every time I want tea, I have to go all the way to my room, clear on the other side. And I'm walking really slow, so that's like an extra hour every time I want tea. Okay, put it back. Put it down.

And that time, it really died. Stayed dead, because it was just too complicated. But that's a simple example. That's the whole dependent origination right there. And it's fast.

As Ajahn Chah described it once—I love this—he said the dependent origination is like falling out of a tree. You're at the top of a tree, and you fall down. All the twelve links of dependent origination are like twelve

branches on that tree. You fall down past them really fast and just hit the ground. You don't get to stop and go, "Oh, that's contact. That's feeling. That's tanha. That's upadana." But sometimes it does slow down in retreat. That's one of the interesting things. But mostly it's like, "Oh, how can I save this mug?" You didn't quite see the whole thing going. Whap—you just hit the bottom. You're in dukkha.

But then the sense of self dies and it's gone. So the magic trick is seen through at that point. And if you can just get interested in exploring it rather than hating or fearing it, it really gets quite interesting. It starts to lose its magical power. "Oh my god, the sense of self again with this mug, and I'm suffering, what can I do?" Instead of putting it down and walking away and noticing—wait, that self just died. It's gone now.

And again, this is from Ajahn Buddhadasa. He talks about shunyata, emptiness. In the translation from Santikaro, he translates shunyata as "voidness," which sounds—I don't know, it just sounds strange to us. But to me, okay, it sounds strange to me. But he's talking about one way he's using shunyata, or voidness: that all phenomena—not just me and you—all phenomena are empty of intrinsic, lasting sense of self. They're all void, empty in that way. That's how it is, not somewhere we have to get to.

And so he talks a lot about not only noticing this birth and death of self—what conditions cause it to arise, what conditions changing cause it to die—which is fascinating to see. But also to notice, as he says, there are many, many moments in a day when there is no sense of self at that moment. There are voids. He talks about many moments that are empty in that way—empty of a sense of self. And he talks about how important it is to notice these many moments of emptiness and to generate—this is his language—generate a contentment with voidness. Generate a contentment when there's not this birth and death of self, when there's not this strong sense of personality view.

And I think that's very interesting advice, because often—there was a time a couple of weeks ago, it's not happening here so much now—where it was a kind of phase where a lot of you were coming in, you who were here then, just saying, "Nothing's happening." It's either boring or too dull or calm. Or some people even reported they noticed their minds kind of bringing up angry memories so they'd have something to work on. Or bringing up some kind of unpleasant, difficult past—sort of like bringing up the fugitives so you'd have something to chew over. Instead of generating a contentment with those moments when there's no big sense of me, I've seen it in myself how often the mind jumps to a suffering scenario because the sense of self is there.

And you look around—what is that sense of self? It's just this little contraction, just this little moment of clinging around a sense experience, around a thought, around a feeling tone: pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. Just like this. It seems gross, but often when we look, it's very quick and very subtle. But I keep seeing this over and over in my practice, in my life: the more subtle ones are the ones that are harder to see, and they're really driving the bus.

The big ones cause suffering, certainly. This big personality view where we're all caught in it, and I'm no good—yes, we're caught in it, but it's not really unobserved. We do notice it's there. Even if we believe it,

it's easier to observe. But I've noticed this sense of generating contentment with voidness—at times when that sense of self dies and no other sense of self arises. Sometimes that's lovely. And I know you all know that. We're just present with the is-ness of things, that place of no problem, as one of my friends says. You're quite awake. Things are just so simple. What's the problem with that? Nothing.

But there are other times when the mind is just not quite so awake, and there's not a sense of self. It's a little bit like it's calm, the mind maybe a little dull or a little bit like, "What now?" Sometimes that sense of emptiness opens into fear. I think Stephen Batchelor—I don't have the quotation here—says the sense of emptiness isn't just this beautiful oceanic bliss. Emptiness in the big picture is a falling apart of all our strategies for self-congratulation and self-protection, all our ways of getting through the world. All those strategies fall apart. Sometimes that brings up a little fear.

But sometimes this contentment with voidness is just nothing special. And I've seen—that's what I was saying—so often just the subtle clinging, the sense of that contraction of me, even around some stupid, unpleasant, or difficult story. It's almost as if it's just cozier to have this sense of me. And "sense of me" is even too strong a phrase. It's just a little—that's the best I can describe it. But it's almost like putting on an old, cozy, fuzzy bathrobe that you just feel comfortable in. And without it, what? There's nothing here. "Oh, yeah, that's right. I'm not really doing it right. I feel so much better now. I'm familiar. I know where to go from that." But this—what? "Well, if there's no one here, who's doing it? Okay, I'm afraid. Okay, that's better. I can put back on my cozy bathrobe."

It's really interesting. To me, at least—you might think I'm loony, so look and see for yourself. But as Ajahn Buddhadasa says, many, many, many times a day there's also this experience of voidness, this kind of emptiness that's empty of sense of self. So start to notice it. Not me looking for it—that's wanting. Just moments of neutral, moments of space. Don't make a space, but just notice moments of space between activities. Or notice how if you're sitting and the thought ends, the mind says, "Get back on the breath quick before something else happens." God forbid there should be a space. Or you finish an activity and immediately we have to do another activity.

And it's like I have to jump up and do something else right away. I'm not a particularly energetic person, but I can't just sit down and be for a moment. I've got to do this, do this, do this, do this. That sense of compulsion—just notice the space. Notice if there's space between thoughts. Notice if there's space between breaths. Finish eating, and before you jump up from your eating and go do your walking, just be with the stillness.

Just start to notice when there's nothing special going on. You don't have to dull out. You don't have to space out. You don't have to create something to feel like you're doing it. Just start to incline towards the voidness. And then when the sense of self arises around the next thing to do, or the mug, or whatever it is, instead of recoiling, just notice—that's the next arising condition. Fine. It might be a sound, or it might be the sense of self, or it might be a smell. What's the difference? Just notice it arising.

Buddhadasa again: normally we don't notice these moments of shunyata, of voidness, because we're so involved with experience and concocting conceptual thoughts. And we do—that's part of what Sayadaw said. We get pulled back into the personality, the experience, the conceptual thoughts. But here, don't hate the thoughts. Just shift to awareness of the concocting. "Oh yeah, look at that—making up a whole story. Oh yeah, it's like that. Personality views like this, the stories like that." We don't have to make anything be different. Just bring in interest, that quality of "what's happening now?" That confidence, entrusting the mindfulness, entrusting the awareness. And the truth of things will unravel by itself.

You're not here to create no-self—that's impossible. You're not here to discover some other world. It will reveal itself. The misperception is seen through with the steadiness of awareness, with the steadiness of mindfulness.

Reality doesn't change. And even our personality—it may change a little bit, but mostly it doesn't seem like our personalities change a whole lot. And that's not what it's about. It's about just honing the mindfulness, the awareness, and trusting it to the point where we see through the whole show. The sense of self, that subtle little clinging around any experience, a little craving, or the whole full-blown story—we just see it as appearances arising and passing, just like any other experience that arises and passes.

And in those moments where it's void of self, as Buddhadasa said, but also quite awake—it's like someone was saying in an interview today: it's just so simple. Things just arising and passing. It's so simple, I like to say, that we can't stand it. The mind that wants to think about stuff says, "How can you function like this?"

But this is from the Buddha. I really like this, and I hope it makes sense. He's talking about how things are in his mind. He says: "Thus, bhikkhus, the Tathagata does not conceive of a visible thing apart from sight." In other words, there's just sight. He doesn't conceive of a visible thing as apart from sight. He does not conceive of something that's unseen. He does not conceive of a thing to be seen. He does not conceive about a seer.

You get that? So apart from sight, there's not a thought, there's not a concept about "that object is being seen" or "this seer is seeing that object" or "there are other things that aren't being seen." He's not conceiving about anything—just seeing. There's just seeing. Not *he* seeing. There's just seeing. Similar for hearing, for cognition: "It is not conceived about one who cognizes." Thus, bhikkhus, the Tathagata, being such-like in regard to all phenomena seen, heard, sensed, and cognized, is just thus. Just thus. Nothing else. Like that Bahiya Sutta: in the seen, there's only the seen.

Let me read you something similar, I think it's from Adyashanti: "Self-referencing is the mind's tendency to locate itself. So when it is realized that there is no self apart from the perceiving, then the tendency to try to find oneself in any experience, insight, or concept ceases."

We don't make it cease. It's just like when we see clearly—the concept about someone seeing, that ceases.

What I'm talking about is the condition where the mind has no compulsive need to understand in terms of

ideas, concepts, and beliefs. A condition where you are no longer referencing the mind, feelings, or emotions for security in any way. No compulsive need to understand. Things are just as they are. And it's so simple. And there are moments we all know that. And that's the sense of emptiness.

Buddhadasa talked about emptiness in another way too. He talked about two kinds of shunyata. The second meaning of shunyata points to the quality of the mind when it isn't grasping and clinging at anything. The character of the mind, when it isn't attaching to anything, is called voidness also.

So the first meaning of shunyata points out that all things are void, all phenomena are void of intrinsic self-existence—that voidness is the inherent characteristic of all things. The second meaning points to the mind that isn't grasping or clinging at anything.

In a way, the closest we can get, an easy way to access this, is through that sense of simple, pure mindfulness, simple, pure awareness. In that moment when it moves from "Oh, and me, and this" to "Oh, it's like that"—that is a movement into the intimation of that quality of mind or heart that isn't clinging to anything. Rather than trusting the story, just start to recognize that. That's another kind of contentment with voidness that we can generate, that we can pay attention to.

And it doesn't lead to annihilation. It doesn't lead to non-functionality. It doesn't lead to a disconnect where who cares about anything. I think you all know that.

So I'll just close with a couple of short readings you've probably heard. One is a description of a Japanese nun named Togetsu. Togetsu saw that arising arose, abided, and fell away. She saw that knowing this arose, abided, and fell away. Then she knew that there was nothing more than this—no ground, nothing to lean on stronger than the cane she held. Nothing to lean upon at all, and no one leaning. And she opened the clenched fist in her mind and let go and fell into the midst of everything.

And falling into the midst of everything doesn't mean you don't care.

This is from Padampa Sangye: "Once you realize emptiness, it would be absurd to do anything harmful. When you realize emptiness, compassion arises with it simultaneously."

And let's end with this from Nisargadatta: "Once you say with confidence, born from direct experience, 'I am the world, the world is myself'—falling into the midst of everything—you are free from desire and fear on the one hand and become totally responsible for the world on the other. The senseless sorrow of humankind becomes your sole concern."

So let's just sit for a moment and generate a contentment with voidness, or recognize non-voidness with contentment, as the case may be.

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