Exploring Grasping at Views

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:00:03

The essence of what I want to speak about tonight is an exploration of attachment to views and opinions.

Since we were mentioning clinging, *upadana*, today—there are many places where the Buddha spoke about four fields of grasping, he called them. Just four big areas where grasping comes up a lot.

The first is pretty obvious: sense desires. The next is grasping at views and opinions. This is a huge source of confusion and suffering. Third is *sakkaya-ditthi—ditthi* means view, so it's actually grasping or attachment to view of self, sense of self. Really, both of those are views, so I'm going to conflate them. And the fourth is rites and rituals, which is really talking about believing. It's almost back in the Buddha's day where there were beliefs—for instance, certain religious beliefs that if you washed yourself in a certain river, that would wash away all your previous bad karma. So he's saying attachment to that is not helpful. But we could think of it almost as magical thinking, our little personal rites and rituals.

I'm not speaking about all of those tonight. I just want to talk about attachment to view, because I personally find it really fascinating. Just a warning: I can go on and on. But I won't. I find it fascinating.

I want to start with something the Buddha spoke about: three levels of wisdom, three levels of understanding, which I think can be really useful if we realize that things are happening on all three levels.

The first is called acquired wisdom—something we've read, something we've heard, something someone's told us. Extremely useful. I mean, that's what we're up here doing, and what you read in the suttas. Acquired wisdom. Of course, because we don't know for ourselves, we don't really know what's true or not, but it's extremely useful.

The second level is sort of putting that information to use. We contemplate it. We explore it in our experience. It's a kind of using the thinking mind in a useful way. We start to understand it. Take impermanence, for example. We first hear it and think, "Yeah, it could be. Makes sense." At the second level, we're thinking about it, consciously noticing it. "Yeah, yeah, pretty much. That seems like I could accept that." But that level still isn't transformational.

The third level is *bhavana-maya-pañña*. *Bhavana* means mental cultivation. You could say that's the level of insight when we talk about insight meditation. That is the level where it's transformational.

So what's happening in a moment of insight—of dhamma insight, insight in your experience, or even insight into some personal problem or a mathematics problem or anything? It's not like you're sitting

thinking about it and it goes, "Yes, that makes sense. That's the rational answer." It's a kind of aha moment. Just all of a sudden, you recognize something in a different way. It's not an experience of thinking.

The way I talk about it is that it's really a shift of perception. We recognize something in one way—that's just how it is. And suddenly, something lets go that we didn't even know was being held, and we perceive something in a different way.

You know those images where if you look at it one way, it's two vases, and then if you shift your perception, it's two faces? Both perceptions are there in that phenomenon. It's not like you get rid of one piece of paper and bring up the other one. Both ways of perceiving are there. One isn't true and one isn't false, but they're different modes of perceiving. That's a simple way of talking about it.

But really, to me, it feels like that's what's happening with insight—on a gross level or on the most subtle levels, something lets go.

And so reality doesn't change—maybe even this particular situation isn't ostensibly externally different—but because of this perceiving in a completely different, unexpected way, it opens up a whole different understanding, a whole other possibility of response.

Hopefully in some sense you know what I'm talking about, and I'm not just making this up. What the heck is she talking about? Never happened to me.

So we're waiting for the huge insight that's going to end it all, and meanwhile we're having all these little ones. "But I saw this. I really understood that craving comes and goes. And when the craving for that banana is gone, it's really gone. I don't need the banana. The freedom from craving is freedom. I really got that." So how come, two seconds later, "I've got to have that banana"? Like, I really got it.

I'm choosing something simple, but on deeper levels—deep personality patterns of real suffering—don't you sometimes feel frustrated? Like, "I really understood this. Why?" And maybe not just this retreat. People have said, and this is not unique at all, "Now I'm seeing the last retreat. I went through this. I really understood this, and somehow I forgot it." And now it's like, "Oh, right. That. I'm having to learn it again."

Well, yes. That's why it's practice. And it's also because of the subtlety—the subtlety of levels of delusion. So we keep having insights again and again and again. I'm saying this not to be discouraging, but to be encouraging. We think, "Well, now I saw it. It's over." But the perception shifts back again. Yet once we've recognized something in a different way, even when it shifts back to the other way, you know—doesn't it change something in the mind stream? There's another possibility now.

And so with impermanence, the simplicity of really getting that the suffering in something isn't not getting what I want, but the craving itself—on some level, absolutely, I know that. Maybe not absolutely; okay, absolutely for the moment, then relatively I know it, and then we forget. But that experience of really

knowing—that shift of perception from "gratification comes from getting the thing" to "it's just being okay with the craving and then it's gone"—that changes something radically in my understanding. You can't give that understanding to anybody else, right? But at the same time, no one else can take it away from you. This is the level of insight wisdom that's really transformative to us.

So how does it come about? That's what we all want to know.

You may have noticed by now that it doesn't occur through willpower. It doesn't occur from wishing it. "Okay, now today I'm going to sit under this tree, and I'm going to see to the depths of impermanence. Boom." Okay, the Buddha could do that—that's a different thing. That's adhiṭṭhāna, based in wisdom of knowing what's appropriate. That's a whole other talk. But it's not like just wishing for it. And it's not by thinking about it. Something lets go that we didn't know was clinging.

There are many different ways, but what I want to talk about tonight is clinging to view, to an idea, which at the level of our insight wisdom can get very subtle. In the world, it's not so subtle. The suffering of clinging to views—the conflict, the pain, the hatred, the violence—is appalling and shocking. Well, it's not all the other guys; it's the same pattern, right down into our practice here. So that's what I want to talk about.

So say someone told me this example a few years ago. They were in a sitting and the body just got so restless, so unpleasant, so difficult that they couldn't stand it. They stood up, and it was in a different place—they were in the back of the room and you could only get out by threading your way through all the people, and it was really, really crowded. So social shame kept them there.

But standing there, the experience she was telling us about was this: the vedana is so unpleasant, so horrible. This is causing me so much suffering. This is just horrible. I can't stand these sensations. And she was just getting completely worked up. But standing there, rather than running away, there was some modicum of mindfulness. And at some point, it shifted. *Oh. This is just unpleasant. That's all that's happening. And it's not really what's causing the suffering—it's just my mind going wild.*

And it changed the whole experience. It was still restless. It was still unpleasant. But the belief that this restless experience is unbearable, causing me so much suffering—that belief, that view—was just suddenly seen, and it dropped away. And so the experience itself was perceived and responded to in a radically different way.

As we all know, we can't wish that. It may not happen next time. But remembering when we experience that begins to break us out of views and descriptions of experience that we don't even know we're clinging to. We don't even know we're holding them. That's where, to me, it gets so fascinating.

So to talk about what a view is, I need to start by talking about perception, which luckily we've talked about a lot, so I don't have to go into it too much. But it's fascinating—just fascinating.

As you know, perception is that arising with each moment of contact, and it's that precise in the way the Buddha talked: the description, not the labeling like noting, but the recognition quality. What's happening? As the Buddha says, what we perceive, we think about. Now that doesn't have to be a problem; it's really quite useful.

So there's a perception a little while ago—you heard a sound, and the perception for all of you was probably "bell." And the thought, which maybe doesn't quite bubble up to thinking, was meaning: oh, it's 7:25. That bell's time for the sitting, to go into the hall, to listen to the talk. All of these perceptions, one after the other—you come in and there's a perception of where you sit, and you're a yogi, and I sit up here. You shut up. I talk. It's like all these perceptions; we string them together and describe our world.

It's useful. If every time the bell rang you were all running around—"Oh, the bell! What does that mean? Where do I go?"—nothing could happen. And it works because we have, more or less, close enough, the same description of the perception of what it means, even though whether it was pleasant or unpleasant in that moment for you is different. So that's just how we describe our world—who we are, however we self-identify. All of that is normal and useful on a relative level, on a conventional level. It's not a problem.

Of course, the first place the problem begins, before we even get into views—and we've talked about this as well—is that our perception is quite frequently not accurate. And even more frequently, when it's not accurate, we have no clue that it's not accurate. We totally believe it. We think about it. We build up the description of the world based on that perception.

Sort of. OK, little examples. And what is our perception distorted by? Our friends: greed, hatred, and delusion.

My favorite example for delusion is very impersonal. When I'm home, if I don't have my glasses on, I really don't see that well, obviously. And I like things to be clean, you know, to a certain level of observable cleanliness. So if I'm walking around my house and it hasn't been cleaned for a while and I don't have my glasses on, I'm happy. It's clean. I don't notice anything. I'm quite content. I don't tend to wear my glasses—right now you're all a blur when I'm just walking around if I'm not needing them for something. But then I'll notice. I'll be working at my desk with my glasses on and leave them on when I go into the bathroom or something, and I'm sitting there going, *whoa*. What's that ball of dust? What's that spider? What is that grunge over there? The perception is really changed. The fogginess of delusion is gone. That's just a very simple example, but we misperceive from delusion, and then we think about it.

Or consider when perception is colored by greed or colored by aversion. I remember one day—I don't remember where it was—but it was a really misty foggy day like yesterday, and it went on all day. I noticed for myself how when I walked outside, if my mind was in a little bit of a clinging, happy state, I'd walk out and think, "Oh, this fog is so beautiful and cozy, and the light..." You'd get all the thoughts about it. Then later in the day, as my body hurt and I was feeling grumpy, I'd walk out and think, "Ah, this is so oppressive. It's so heavy." Similar fog—not the same fog, a few hours later—but similar fog. Very different

perception.

What we perceive, we think about. And what we think about, it turns into emotions, moods that go along with it. If we're aware that's happening, great—that's fascinating to bring mindfulness to. When we're not aware, then what we think hardens into a view. And without even recognizing we're attaching to it, we take that to be the true, accurate description of me or you or the fog or reality at this moment.

Dingo Khentse says, "When sense organs encounter an object, the only part the object itself plays is to initiate the process of perception in your consciousness. From then on, as your mind reacts to the object—the fog, the dirt, the banana, whatever—influenced by all the accumulated habits and past experiences of your mind, the whole process is entirely subjective." Notice he's not saying it's kind of subjective, a little subjective. He's saying it's *entirely* subjective. "When your mind is full of anger, the whole world seems to be a hell realm." Have you noticed that? "When your mind is peaceful, free from clinging or fixation, you experience everything as primordially pure." It's really interesting to see.

Or there's this funny story—probably you've heard me tell this before—I heard it from Charles Genoud, about a Zen master and a samurai. Too good. So this wild, aggressive samurai comes to see a Zen master with his sword, angry, threatening to kill the Zen master, screaming and yelling and calling him, "You pig! You pig!" And the Zen master, as they do, just bowed and said, "And you, sir, are a Buddha."

This even took the samurai aback a little. He said, "A Buddha? You see me as a Buddha? How am I a Buddha?"

And the Zen master said, "Well, a pig sees a pig. A Buddha sees a Buddha."

It's really more that way than we might realize. Again, it's not to take it personally, but just watch how this works. It's so fascinating.

So perception, again—perception colored by any one of these kleshas—we just don't quite recognize it. It leads to a description that's inaccurate, which leads to a view, and then can lead to acting on it. Sometimes we can see through it to accurate perception, and then the whole thing falls away.

For example, someone told me at a retreat—not this retreat, but a smaller one—that they noticed a particular yogi hadn't come to any sittings for a day or two, and they got really concerned. Which can be good. It can be good. If someone's really missing for two days, it would be good to tell us. But this was somewhere else, a smaller venue.

They started noticing after some time, "Well, they really are missing." And all the thoughts and all the worry gets going. Where could they be? They're lost in the woods, or whatever. And as the yogi didn't show up, the thoughts start to come together with emotion. And it hardens. It moves from perception to thinking about it—citta—to view, diṭṭhi. Hardened into view. "Yes, something's really wrong, and I have to do something about it."

You can see the difference between when thoughts are just going through your mind and you can recognize, "Oh yeah, it's just thoughts," versus when suddenly the view is, "Yes, something's wrong. I've got to let someone know right away"—that energy, that sense that this is an accurate description of reality.

And then this person recognized—after I don't know how long, because they were telling me later—they recognized that, oh, actually... And this is also funny, because they were just looking in the wrong place. They had a wrong idea of which place in the hall that person sat. So for two days, they went through this whole thing. And then they saw the person and said, "Oh, okay."

Some misperceptions are easy to see through. The view, the reactions—we can just kind of laugh, hopefully. Okay, great. We learn how it works. But so many others, so subtly, we don't see through because they're happening so frequently.

When the Buddha talked about hallucinations of perception—inverted or distorted perception—what he meant is that we tend to perceive what is in constant flux as being permanent. There's not a big sign saying, "Yes, this is permanent." But perception is happening every moment, and we're perceiving and assuming permanence so much of the time. We don't recognize it.

Or, regarding anicca and dukkha, we don't perceive the unsatisfactory nature of things. We perceive something as offering security, satisfaction, happiness. Or, of course, as Guy has been talking about so much, we perceive a separate identity, a separate self where there isn't one.

These perceptions, these distortions, these hallucinations of perception—of course they lead to thinking, lead to descriptions of our world, lead to how we act and respond. But they're happening so quickly, these perceptions. They're so fleeting that we don't tend to even recognize those perceptions are occurring, never mind all the thoughts and reactions that describe our world, the views that arise from them. Just such a subtle process.

The Dalai Lama said once that all of our difficulties come through mistaken perception. That's why there is so much emphasis on direct experience and true knowledge.

The emphasis here, the simplicity of moment-to-moment mindful awareness—not looking for something, because that's already too much. We're looking for some idea of what should be there. Gone, you know? But through moment-to-moment direct experience, each moment of pure mindfulness is just a moment. As I think I said last night, mindfulness in that moment is free from wanting, from greed, from aversion, from delusion—just for that moment. So there's the possibility of a more accurate perception. It's quick. It's quick. Not every accurate perception leads to insight. But the steadiness of mindfulness and simple perception is what allows for that shift, that wisdom, to arise.

So perception, when it's inaccurate, leads to the way we think about and describe ourselves, describe the world—and leads to when those descriptions are implicitly believed.

The Buddha described a view as "this alone is true, everything else is false"—if only our views telegraphed themselves quite so clearly.

I want to start by talking about how we get attached to our descriptions in a bigger realm than the subtlety of personality view, because it's the same process. Having an opinion or a view in the world isn't a problem. Of course we need it—opinions, preferences, views. It's election time. It's helpful, up to a point, to have a view. If you're going to vote or if you're not going to vote, either one's a choice, an opinion informed by whatever. Knowing that process—no problem. Just to know whether you want to take an orange or an apple at breakfast. There's nothing wrong with using opinions. It's not that in this way we give it all up and can't tell anything from anything. We're not talking about that. We're talking about grasping.

Because once we get attached, this energy of clinging, holding to a description, a view, an understanding of how we think we are, how we think the world is, what's right and what's wrong—the holding to it, to our description—we take it to be the reality. And it's as if, don't believe me, look in your own mind, in your own heart, it's as if our awareness snaps shut. It's as if we stop really looking, because now we know. This is how it is. And we often don't notice, or even allow in, perceptions that run counter to the particular view or description of whatever it is we're holding to. I call it selective perception. And we don't even realize we're doing it sometimes. Sometimes we do.

But this freezes our mind. It freezes the intimacy with experience; we're not recognizing accurately. It freezes our idea of people, our idea of ourself. And in a very subtle way, we just notice what supports our view sometimes. Because when we're really holding to a view, even though if we really look, it's suffering, it's rigidity—we're disconnected from the fluidity, from the beauty, from the intimacy, the mystery of life and ourselves—it can give us this false sense of security. We know what's right, and we stay with the people who believe the same way we do. It's comfortable.

And it's scary when our views are challenged. A lot of times we feel threatened, or anger. I mean, look around the world—incredible violence and fear from different groups of people who have different views or beliefs about anything. It can be subtle, but it can also be obvious.

I can watch myself doing this. Since you guys are really lucky to be sitting and don't have to hear all the pre-election stuff—I tell you, every four years is just, for me, so much suffering. But I watch my mind. It's fascinating. Let's go to a different year, a different election; I won't talk about this one. But in any particular one in the last some years, it's like, I have my views, what I believe. I may not think each particular person is so great, but I know one is more aligned, the best I could do anyway, with the views I have. And I totally believe that's true. I believe my view. I know it matters—it's not like it doesn't matter. So I believe it, but I can really watch and see how my mind snaps shut.

I remember when Nixon—maybe some of you weren't even born then, I don't know—I didn't want to hear any good thing about Nixon. If he came on TV and did something kind of sympathetic, I didn't want to

know it. I didn't want to let it in because it messed with my view of the demon, or whatever. And I can see how hard that is, how much suffering that is in my mind. And when they have the debates with the presidential candidates, I can see in my mind, it doesn't matter for me what anyone says.

There's nothing the candidate I'm not going to vote for could say that could change my mind. Nothing. And if I go in with that view, am I likely to hear anything? Is there even a possibility that I don't have it all scoped out? No, there's no possibility. And I have plenty of friends who all agree with me. Very few people do I know who don't. And then we can't even talk about it. That's half this country. And that's even without coming to blows, without coming to violence.

So this is a delicate line we walk. It's not simple to hold. I'm not saying I've found how to do it, but this is gross—I mean, this isn't hard to notice, right? That I really hold a view, an opinion. I need to act on that view and opinion. I'm not renouncing that. But can I do that without the attachment that makes me right and them wrong, that shuts down my perception and makes it impossible to receive any new information?

It's like Krishnamurti talked about—freedom from the known. When we're attached to view, we're the prisoner of what we think we know. And then we can unconsciously make choices to only let in the information that confirms what we know. Or we hear information that discounts it and think, "Well, he's just lying. It doesn't mean that, you can't even believe it." Whatever. You can see how much suffering comes from this in the world. And that's in the really obvious cases. What about all the ones we don't even recognize?

This is from Thich Nhat Hanh: "All things arise because of their interdependence. That is why nothing has a separate, independent identity. Because of our ignorance and hatred, we accuse, reprimand, or slander one another. Each of us is a product of our family, our environment, our friends, our education, our culture, our society. These conditions lead to a certain way of seeing things and a certain way of responding to things. When we see this, we can have compassion for everyone, including ourselves."

Just seeing how much incredible suffering there is in this world from people holding different views about—you pick it—our cultural identity, our gender identity, our religious identity, our country identity, our political identity, whatever it is. I don't have to go through it. You can pick this country, you can pick almost anywhere in the world. And it's interesting to see how it's often the neighbors who are closest that have the most virulent fear and hatred, the greatest sense of their views being assaulted.

Sometimes it can be a little bit amusing when we're moving away from war and hatred and bombs to something a little less intense—just seeing how we can act on our views and how we are so entrenched in our way of seeing that we just can't even get it, that another way is equally valid.

Years ago, many years ago here, we had a teen retreat with teenagers. Quite a few of the kids had come from the city, from a whole different environment than this place. So it was hard enough—they're having

to eat tofu and beans and all of that. But the cooks at that particular time were in a "sugar is poison" phase. They wouldn't serve anything with sugar. God forbid there should be any sugar out anywhere.

So these kids—I mean, they're in this really austere environment, out of the city, so many difficult things. The food, the meditation. And then they're told they can't have any sugar. It was just really too much. A few of them were really suffering.

Finally, with the intercession of one of the teachers who had to do a major intervention with the cooks, some of the kids were allowed to have a secret stash of sugar. They could go hide it somewhere. Here they come in from the city, where people are probably dealing drugs on the street corner...

And they have to go hide their sugar from each other. Pretty whacked out.

So just this sense of being willing to let go of our perceptions. "Sugar is bad for you always and for everybody." How do we let go of that? And these are views we even know we've picked up. But what do we know for sure—so for sure that we don't even think about it? We don't even question it. We don't even know that there's another option. This gets into the territory, of course, of personality view, even more than worldview.

Just to give a simple example: a couple of years ago, I was teaching here with Steve Armstrong, and somebody said something—I can't remember the whole context, but I think Steve had somehow been talking about karma. Anyway, the subject of rebirth had come up, which luckily I don't have to clarify because we have Guy, and I'm sure he'll talk about it in much more specifics and brilliant detail than I ever could. So I can just throw things in like that and not have to describe them because Guy's here. That's what's really great about teaching with a team.

So I'm just mentioning rebirth. I'm not saying anything about true or not true—who knows? But it had come up, and somebody just said something in the question period: "Well, of course we know that's not true." Just completely dismissing it with an assumption that that's what we all know. Scientifically, no way that could be true. Then he went on and asked some question. And I really thought, what's Steve going to say?

What he said was great. He pulled this example. He said, "Oh, you're so sure that couldn't possibly be true?" He didn't try to convince them. He just said, "Here's another story." There's somebody we know—we all know him—a Sri Lankan man. When he was born, at about two years old, he spontaneously started chanting in Pali. Really, really long Pali chants, in a kind of... I mean, he was two years old. He'd never heard these in his two-year-old life. And of course, Sri Lanka has a lot of Buddhism. So apparently they took him to some scholars, and they said not only is it accurate—he's chanting like the whole Satipatthana Sutta, not just a few lines—not only is it accurate, it's in a kind of ancient Pali that isn't even what the scholars of this day were using.

What do you do with that? He started remembering spontaneously lifetimes back with Buddhaghosa, who

wrote the Visuddhimagga. He was a secretary or something. We know this guy. This is a true story. What do you make of that?

If we can not have to make anything of it—if we can let that openness, that not knowing, inform our mind... You get a sense? Well, I don't know what your minds did with it. You all got kind of quiet. I didn't see anyone going, "Oh, that's a crock." You just were kind of listening. So if you didn't do that, if you just kind of held that space for a minute—huh, what could that be?—you get a sense of the lack of clinging, the openness to discover, the potential to just soften.

Surrender into the mystery of this moment without having to have an explanation before, during, or after. Without having to compare it to anything. Without having to know what it means about you. Without having to know how it compares to that other person or your last retreat or what you read or what Guy said or what Sally said or anything. Just this openness to explore, to be present, yathā bhūta, with things as they have arisen in this moment.

That's just that moment of freedom from the known, freedom from attachment to view, that allows just for this moment of openness and presence and freedom to discover—a kind of real tenderness, a kind of curiosity for life. And this is what we're trying to talk about in terms of the quality of mindfulness.

When we talk about that level of Dhamma vicaya, investigation is not "Now I will understand this, and I'll put it together with this, and I'll have this in it." You know Suzuki Roshi's famous line about beginner's mind: "In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities. In the expert's mind there are few." Just to be here now, this quality of almost childlike innocence, connectedness and wonder without having to draw conclusions.

My favorite example of this, which I've often used, is the world-renowned cellist Yo-Yo Ma. He's currently involved in so many cross-cultural musical adventures, you could say. You can see in him this kind of openness to discover all different kinds of music and kinds of instruments and forms, and he brings them together. He does this Silk Road ensemble now with people from all over the world, from all different kinds of music, different scales, different tonalities. I've listened to some of it, and I have to say, I really don't get some of it. It's out there for my kind of limited view of looking. But I love the sensibility.

One time years ago, before he was doing the Silk Road, I saw in Germany some kind of TV documentary about him. All I remember is he was flying in a helicopter into the middle of Africa to visit a very simple tribe. He got out of this helicopter with his million dollar cello. They brought him to meet the head musician of this tribe—I think it was a tribe of bush people, they called them. This musician's instrument was literally a big empty oil drum, a metal oil drum onto which he had fashioned a series of strings on just a wooden pole. That was his instrument. So he was playing and singing on that, and then Yo-Yo Ma was playing on his cello. And then Yo-Yo Ma says, "Oh, let's switch!" So they switch instruments.

He had this really childlike openness. He's trying to play this guy's instrument and he goes, "Oh, I just can't

play this nearly as good as you. You play it so well." And it wasn't put on at all. It was just this complete openness to discovery. I've always remembered it because I was so touched by that quality of mind that isn't building walls and separations through our views of "Well, I have this million dollar cello and this background of all this Western classical music, and I know so much—and look at this oil drum." None of that was there. Just this sense of appreciation within different cultural contexts instead of trying to reconcile all views.

The freedom from views isn't that we reconcile them all and figure it all out. And this includes views of practice, by the way—views of what's good practice, views of choiceless awareness versus concentration versus you name it. Without trying to reconcile them all into the one right view, it's the sense of not needing to hold to any view. We can use them as skillful means, but can you just imagine that possibility of not holding to any view whatsoever? It's scary a little bit. It's also really freeing.

Views of practice, as I mentioned. I love watching this in myself, because what happens is the mind has some little experience, makes up a few thoughts about it, and goes, "Oh, that's how it's supposed to be." I don't know if you notice this at all in your practice. And having the honor to sit while different people come and talk to us, we can see it happening one after the other. When you're just in your own experience, you don't quite see it.

So we can see people come in and go, "Well, good sati. I had good mindfulness because when I really paid attention to the pain, it went away." Or someone else comes in and says, "Well, my mindfulness isn't good because when I try and pay attention to this unpleasant thing, it just goes away and I can't hold on to it. I should be able to see its arising, its persistence, and its passing away, but I can't see that because as soon as I look, it goes away."

And someone else says, "You know, I'm not having emotions. And because I'm not having emotions, I'm not really getting to the meat of things. There's something wrong." And the next person comes in and goes, "But there's just so many emotions, nothing but emotions. It's really just about getting concentrated and being with the breath. I can't do choiceless awareness because it's just breath, breath, breath, calm, calm, calm. Nothing's happening."

Choiceless awareness—yes, it's awareness with all that arises. But there are thoughts, and sounds, and endless things appearing. How can I possibly get calm when all this stuff is happening? And then it's the same person rotating through all of these positions, one day after the other.

None of it is suffering if we're not clinging to the view. But when you see this—call up the thought in the back of your mind. When you're suffering, when things are not okay, when there's conflict, call up the thought: What am I really believing right now? And the thought will come up: "I'm really believing there should be no thoughts."

Don't just bang it away and say, "Oh, I know that's stupid." Yes, we know it's stupid, but that doesn't mean

we're not believing it. So call up the thought and see: right now there's a clinging to that view. And that's the suffering. Great. Explore it. Is it possible to even entertain the sense of: what if there's no perfect right view of what your practice should be?

Oh my god. You can't keep judging yourself, can you? You'll never get perfect either, because there is no perfect. Just that surrender into what's happening now.

This is both incredibly freeing—freeing from the clinging, the stricture, the measurement, the limitation of attachment to view—but also, at times, it can be very unsettling, because we are familiar with wanting this sense of security. Even if it makes us totally miserable, we're upheld by our view. It's like, "I know. I know what's true. I can't ever do it. I'll never be able to do it. I'm completely hopeless. But at least I know that. And I know what's true." Opening to "Well, what's appropriate? What's happening now?"—that can be a little bit scary.

So these views of right practice, and sakkāya-diṭṭhi—the sense of me—really arise in the same way. Guy has talked about this a lot: a moment of clinging to any sense experience or to any of the khandas. But you can see, again, how there's a perception.

For instance, you're walking and there's just a slight unpleasant sensation. It's very faint. There's some aversion. And there's a whole train of thought about it: "It's unpleasant, but I'm not seeing it clearly. And this pain has been there the whole time. I'm blocked. There's something wrong." Or in the sitting, that pain in your stomach comes back. "Oh, there's that block again." You ever think that? "There's that block again. What can I do to get rid of it? How can I move through it? My practice is stuck because I keep having the same block." A whole sense of self arises, and then all the stories and memories about me and the things I haven't done and how I'm blocked, and the thoughts, right?

Then the next sitting you come and sit down, and when that starts, you just meet it with mindfulness, and it dissolves in sparkling light. "Ah, that block has dissolved because my practice is moving!" And it's pleasant. Then we start having memories that support our good practice, our onward-leadingness, and ideas about the future—like Joseph talked about, this body of light. All the memories that come up at that time support our view of ourself as being the practitioner of the ages, the next Dalai Lama in female form, whatever it is.

Selective perception. When you're feeling really horrible, you don't remember all those great moments. You might remember, but you throw them away: "Well, that was just a fluke. This is really me. This is the core." It's just taking a perception that's skewed by aversion or clinging.

A delusion is definitely there because we think it's me—a whole story of me—and we run with it.

Ajahn Sumedho talks about this self-view beautifully. He says, "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 arises in consciousness." That's what sakkāya-diṭṭhi is: that view of me arising in consciousness. "But if I know that—that view of me—then my refuge is no longer in being the person. I'm not taking refuge in the personality or my views and opinions. So then the world of Ajahn Sumedho ends, because what we're taking refuge in is this awareness rather than in the view of me, of personality." I'm so good, I'm so bad, I'm this, I'm that. Our refuge then is this awareness rather than in trying to sustain refined experiences in consciousness, because you can't do it. Resting in this conscious awareness is what he refers to as coming home, or our real home.

It's just that simple shift—from "There's no way I can do this, and I saw this and that, and here I am" to "Oh, awareness of... I can't do this, and this and that... awareness of." The refuge is the awareness, not the clinging to the view.

He said something I found very interesting. I've often mentioned this to groups—he shared it with a gathering of Western teachers a few years ago. He was talking about personality view, attachment to our views of our personality, our sense of self. And he said he thinks the biggest hindrance for Westerners—this is just his opinion—is self-doubt in regard to trusting our insights into awareness, trusting our insights, that perception of the liberating sense of refuge in awareness.

It's similar to what Guy was talking about last night—minding the gap. That sense of just taking refuge in that gap, in that moment of non-concocting, of non-creating. Just the stillness, the silence of not creating a view or sense of self. Just this. The simplicity—so simple. That's what he's talking about: our insight into the liberating potential of a moment of awareness. Just this.

Ajahn Buddhadasa talks about generating a contentment with this. He calls it emptiness. He used many words for it. Generating a contentment with it. And seeing how quickly—this is what Sumedho is saying—our self-doubt arises. We don't tend to trust that. We don't generate contentment. We don't even believe it really happened, or if it did, we don't really think it's anything significant.

He says this happens in part because our belief in our personalities is so strong. We really have such faith in our personality views. It's so strong that that becomes our reference point. That's where we take refuge. That's what we really believe. And we wouldn't think of it as belief—we just think it's true. And so we get caught back into believing very implicitly the thoughts, the views, the story of our personality, our personal history.

All that's there—it's all cause and effect. But any of us, if we look steadily moment to moment, our moods are always changing. Our personalities have certain conditioned patterns, but they're changing all the time, aren't they? Yes. The same ones may come back very frequently—that's the conditioned patterns. But nothing's always there. What he's talking about is our believing so implicitly in our personalities.

Here's a simple example: a moment just—

Just the gap. Awareness is like this. And a moment before, it's, "Oh, there's no way I can possibly do this."

And then it's so high. "What about stream entry? And what about all these things? And who am I? And what are they talking about anyway? This guy says it's like this, and then it's like that. And the Burmese and the Thais. And what about the Tibetans? And what about the Zen?" And it's hopeless. And how can we... we fall back into that. And in that moment of, "Oh, awareness," all of that drops away.

And then our habit of mind jumps back into, "Okay, it dropped away, but that's no way to live. How can you live like that? You have to have opinions. You have to know. You have to teach, right?" And that's what we believe. That becomes our reference point. It's a lot of suffering. It's a lot, a lot of suffering.

But it's radical trust in not knowing. Just the willingness to not know, to open into this moment is both freeing, but again, it is radically unsettling at times. It's not like every moment is just nice, nice, nice, leading to the most nicest, and it just goes like that.

As I said in the beginning, even with our gross views in the world, when our views, our perceptions, when our views are threatened—that we've been somehow holding to, whether it's in the world or in our view of ourself—it gives us a sense of stability. When that's threatened, that can be really scary.

Sometimes it happens in meditation. For a simple example, there's just a moment where suddenly the perception of the solidity of body goes away. Just sensations in space, you could say. And at times, that's really pleasant. But sometimes, the first time that happened, a lot of fear can come up because, where's the body? You open your eyes—okay, here it is. But it feels, you know, it's just because it's unfamiliar. And we're comfortable with the familiar.

And in terms of our whole subtle personality view, what Subhuti's talking about, we have such a strong belief in it. And the ongoingness of practice keeps... we keep coming up against the views we don't even know we're holding about ourselves, the beliefs, even when they're suffering ones. But every belief we have about ourselves, as we keep on with steady awareness, is going to be challenged, is going to be questioned. No, we can't hold with clinging to any view and really recognize the truth.

So while it's freeing, I know for me, I remember one time in retreat I recognized this. It felt like in some way, one way of describing my practice is that over the many years it's felt like a series of small little deaths of certain beliefs about who I was that I didn't even know I was holding to—like deaths of a certain sense of Carol-personality.

Now, someone from the outside would say, might say, if they were as aversive as me, "Maybe it died to you, but one would wish that it didn't really stop manifesting in the world." So don't be afraid. You don't really change into someone different. But this belief, this something holding, it dies away.

And there can be a kind of grieving. And it doesn't make any sense. Grieving for what? This stupid idea I had about myself that was causing me enormous suffering, and then there's grief when I'm seeing it's not true? Okay, grieving is like this.

Or we see a certain habit, and we think, "I don't want freedom if I have to get rid of this." Notice that kind of stuff.

There's one quotation from Stephen Batchelor that I like a lot. He says, "Emptiness is not just the experience of oceanic bliss. It is a falling apart of all of our strategies of self-interest, self-centeredness, and seeming protection. And although it is freeing, it can also bring up great disconcertion." Disconcertion—if you're not a native English speaker, it means a kind of dis-ease. It's unfamiliar. It's confusing. Like being in no man's land.

So just so simple, we can't stand it.

But when we can just open, just radical surrender into this moment as it is, free from view, free from clinging to view—just that willingness to generate a contentment with emptiness, with non-concocting, with not needing to know and describe.

Then we're left with—I'll just end with this from Ajahn Sumedho, because it also speaks to what Guy said this morning, or last night, about the island:

"The only way to go beyond thinking and emotional habit, *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*, sense of self, is through awareness of them—through awareness of thought, through awareness of emotion, through awareness of views. The island that you cannot go beyond 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 practice being awake and aware.

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