# Exploring Perception and Sense of Self

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 55:13

So tonight I'd like to pick up and explore a bit more one of the many really interesting themes that Winnie mentioned last night, particularly the one about exploring this sense of self, or as I like to think of it, demystifying the sense of self.

As we know, the teaching of anatta is quite central to the way the Buddha taught, and the understanding of it really can be quite freeing in the moment. But our tendency so much is to think that it's something we have to understand by thinking about it. And thinking about it—have you noticed what happens when you think about it? Does the sense of self seem to get a little bit stronger? The more we think about it, the worse it gets, because it's got nothing to do with thought. And then all the questions arise: well, if there's no self, who does this and who does that? But the thing is, there already isn't. Nothing changes except our perception.

As Winnie was saying, I think this idea that we have to get rid of something and then we'll be free—no. It's like this: I think I'm probably not the only one, but I do experience quite frequently a very palpable sense of self. Do you? So it's an experience like any other experience. We can explore it.

Remembering that everything the Buddha taught was quite pragmatic—to free our minds and hearts from confusion and suffering, not to add more conceptual philosophical overlay to our already crowded minds—I want to offer just a few ways of exploring this in practice. You'll find your own as well.

The Buddha said one time that consciousness is like a magic show. And I want to say the sense of self is like that. He describes a magician at some dusty crossroads in Bihar back 2,600 years ago. Kids and people would come and be so fascinated by the magic, but as soon as you see behind the curtain what the trick is, it loses all its interest, doesn't it? Oh, that's just what's going on. So the sense of self is just like that.

Ramana Maharshi said a similar thing. He said the ego—I'm substituting the idea of self—is like a ghost caused by the play of shadows. When you look closely, the ghost vanishes. It was never really there. So also with a sense of separate self: as long as one does not look closely at it, it continues to give trouble. But when one looks for it, it is not found to really exist.

Our ideas about having to get rid of this thing already posit a sense of existence based on just not really looking, not really noticing what's happening. So that's what I want to talk about tonight: how to investigate, how to look into it.

One clue comes from the Majjhima Nikaya, where somebody asked the Buddha—put succinctly—what is it that liberated ones know? And you've heard this; we all know it intellectually, so that's how we know

there are different levels of knowledge, because this won't be news, but we're not liberated yet. Nothing whatsoever should be clung to. That's the phrase. What is it that liberated ones know? Nothing whatsoever should be clung to.

This is like the first clue to help us explore when this sense of self arises, rather than thinking we have to somehow get rid of it or blame ourselves. It's more like seeing what's really going on. Nothing changes except perception shifts, and how the perception shifts affects everything else—how we think, what we believe, how we act.

Where I want to start in this bit of deconstructing the magic show tonight is with perception, which again we've already spoken about. It's great on the three-month retreat because I can refer to things without having to explain everything from scratch.

So we've talked about what perception is: that quality, one of the five aggregates, arising in every moment of consciousness, of sense contact—discernment, recognition, memory. It's very useful, isn't it? Perception is really how we construct, describe, and define our world. Without perception, it would be extremely confusing walking in here. The bell would ring—what's that? What is that supposed to mean? What am I doing here?

What are we supposed to do here? Without perception, which is based on our memory and experience, things could be quite messy, couldn't they? And so when we have conventional agreement with our perceptions, things more or less function. We get along.

So perception is essential. It's not like we want to get rid of perception, which we couldn't anyway. We appreciate it. But as we've said, and I think Bhante talked about it, different ones of us have talked about it, perception is really a function of memory. And so perception, in each moment, is informed by all of our past experience. Our personal life experience, our familial history, our cultural history, the society, the education, the people around us. Not that we have time to clock through all of that and see. But even without it being distorted by greed, hatred, or confusion, perception is already informed by all these experiences.

And so what seems so—we believe, often—is really like an attachment to the implicit correctness of our perceptions. Have you ever noticed that? "Yeah, that's just how it is."

I'll give you a simple example. I'm going to try to give simple examples, not complicated ones, because it's the same process. I was at a friend's house—actually, it was Sally, Guy's wife—and I said something about the blue throw, the blue kind of cover that was lying on the back of the couch. She goes, "What blue cover?" I said, "You know, that one right there." She goes, "That's green." I said, "No, it's blue."

So I really tried to see green. I couldn't. She really tried to see blue. She couldn't. It's so interesting. We didn't come to blows about that. We were both willing to let it go. But to really see, even thinking that, and then you have the thought, secretly, "It's blue." There's nowhere to go. You could call in a third person.

There's this sense that there's an ultimate truth, and blue is it, right? Knowing Sally, I'm sure she felt the same about green.

That's a simple thing, right? But you really can get a sense from that if a perception goes a little bit farther. Again, as when Bhante spoke about papañca, the classical phrase from the Buddha is: what we perceive, we think about. What we think about, we complicate—with associations, with memories, with ideas. And then if that thinking and complication happens, just happens, to be fed by some kind of craving, or some kind of aversion, or some kind of identification—whoa, it really can get out of hand quickly.

So I'll give another example of that. I had a lot of examples, but I'm giving this particular example by request. You know you're getting old when people say, "I really want you to tell that story again." You feel like an old performer, like an old singer, and they want to do their new songs, but people go, "We don't want to hear your new songs. Sing that one from the sixties." But it is a good example. It shows how easy it is, and this is where clinging comes into our perception, and we complicate it.

So this friend told me this, a good friend, who was many years ago sitting one of her first retreats in Switzerland. She's Swiss. And at that time, it was a retreat with Ajahn Sumedho, who was her teacher. There were no retreat centers in Switzerland at that time.

It was probably at least twenty years ago. At that time, whoever organized the retreat would rent a place, and Switzerland has these big old houses scattered throughout the lower mountains where children go in the summer for camp. They have tons of room, but they're built really poorly—no insulation, old wood—so very noisy, very creaky. I'm sure some of you can relate to that creaking noise when you're trying to sit.

The way this particular place was laid out, the room they used for the meditation hall was on what we would call the second floor, and immediately below it, on the ground floor, was the walking room. So imagine this building, but without all the stuff in between, following a structured schedule just like here.

She was in a sitting period, struggling as one tends to do in the early days of a retreat, especially a first retreat. She was just starting to feel like she was getting concentrated on her breath. Finally, a moment of calm. It was a little quiet. And then she heard someone walking downstairs in the walking room, because it was so noisy that every step made a sound. *Creak, creak, creak, creak.*

We've really tried to soundproof here, but it's impossible to completely soundproof against other human beings just living. So anyway, this person is walking—*creak, creak*—and she thinks, "They're ruining my concentration. But this is a sitting period. No one's supposed to be walking during a sitting period." It just started feeding aversion: the thought about someone walking when they shouldn't be, and it's a sitting period, and we're all supposed to follow the schedule.

This fed into her own particular nature—maybe colored a little by being Swiss, but also her own sense that this is the right way to do things, that you do what you're supposed to do. She imposes this on herself.

So she's getting really worked up. At some point, seeing there was nothing she could do—she wasn't going to get up and run downstairs and yell at them because she wasn't the manager; she might have had she been the manager, but she wasn't—she was getting into such a snit that she finally thought, "Okay, let me just come back and be with the breath."

She brought her attention back and was able to really land in the breath for a moment. As she truly felt the breath, in that moment the mindfulness—and this is really the power of a moment of pure, simple awareness—that whole story, that whole *papañca*, just wasn't arising. She was simply able to feel the breath.

Without the overlay on perception, she happened to notice that as she breathed out—she was leaning against the wall—her back went against the wall and made that creaking sound she had thought was somebody walking downstairs.

At that point: wow. You never would have discovered that by thinking about it. As soon as she saw it, she didn't have to try to let go. That whole construction, that whole concoction, just completely disappeared. It's not like you're releasing it—it simply goes away by itself because accurate perception doesn't support it. Do you see what I mean?

This is the power of mindfulness: to recognize something accurately. We don't know what we don't know. We can be holding on to perceptions we haven't even recognized, along with all the constructions that arise from them—getting into conflict with ourselves, with our belief systems, with others. I don't even have to take it any further to where this leads in the world.

This is why we're cultivating, why we're practicing, this moment-to-moment simple freshness of attention. It doesn't seem like it's so much. You come in and describe whatever's going on, and I say, "Oh yes, great, you're aware of it." That doesn't really make you feel good, does it? It's a horrible thing happening, and I'm saying, "Good, you were really aware of it."

But that is really the thing. The sense of freshness, almost of wonder, in a moment of awareness, in a moment of presence with whatever's there, allows just for that sense of, oh, maybe recognizing freshly without quite so much overlay on the perception.

And as I imagine you probably know, I know for me, it's not so easy. Even with wholehearted intention, even with all I know about this, even when I'm aware, I just want to bring fresh perception. Already that's an overlay. "I want fresh perception," you know. It's not so easy.

Someone who's been a real inspiration for me over the years—no one I know personally, but just as much as I can tell from reading and listening—is the cellist Yo-Yo Ma. He's quite a world-famous cellist, based in Boston actually, trained in the Western classical music tradition. But how he inspires me is this: the times I've seen videos of him or read about him or heard him on the radio, or seen how he began this Silk Road Ensemble, he seems to really embody this kind of openness and freshness and interest and a kind of

wonder when meeting musicians and instruments and other kinds of music from all different cultures.

Once I saw a video where he arrived somewhere in the middle of a small tribe in Africa and got out of the helicopter with his million-dollar Stradivarius cello and met this old tribal leader who was the chief musician of that tribe. His instrument was literally a round metal oil can on a stick with nails and a string coming out on the stick to make strings like the strings of a cello. And so Yo-Yo Ma, in this video, he plays, then that guy plays, and he goes, "Wow, that's so amazing, let's trade instruments, let me try and play yours." And the man is going, "Oh, I can't play yours, you play it so well." And it's like this sense of total interest.

For some years, he's been the guiding force behind this whole group of musicians, constantly changing, called the Silk Road Ensemble. The Silk Road—the whole area from the Middle East and Central Asia, Mongolia, China, Persia, Turkey, India. And so he's meeting with these musicians from all these areas with their different kinds of music and composing and instruments and different ideas of melody and timing, coming together and writing together, performing together—he with his cello, they with their instruments—really making this blend.

And so it's just really inspiring to me, his openness. And I love the idea, right? Loving the idea wholeheartedly, I listen to the music. I want to like it. I really want to like it. And my mind's like, "But..." You know, I can get it. That Mongolian singing is beautiful, but... And just, my perception from my cultural history can't relax into it. So I can intellectually appreciate. Then I listen more and listen more and I can start to get there. And I just see how difficult it is, even with good intention.

So I think, wow, he's so amazing. This is what he was writing in the forward to their first album. Remember, I think it was Winnie talking about Jared Diamond, when people met back in early days, you always had to suss out who was safe. So he's in a way referring to that. He said that when two people meet, within seconds an assessment is made on whether to trust one another. We all know how destructive it is when there's no trust. If there is some trust, an exchange might take place. As this trust develops over time, the exchange can lead to the best of all possibilities: creativity and learning. To me, this recording is an answer to that question—what happens when strangers meet?

I love it. That seems to be his attitude. He just does so many different things. So I take it as an inspiration, but I also take it as seeing how deeply and subtly ingrained all our past experience is that colors perception, that informs perception. And that's just normal. That's just how it is. So there's nothing wrong with this, and we're not always going to notice it. I'm just describing this and trying to use more simple examples just to see: this is how the process works.

And so then, in terms of perception, remember, I think it was Bonte who talked about the inversions or the distortions of perception—where we see what is in constant change as being permanent. We don't recognize impermanence. We don't recognize the unsatisfactory nature. We, in fact, perceive things as being going to give us lasting happiness. And we don't recognize the insubstantial, no-lasting-self nature of

things. We perceive experience as being me or mine.

So it's on this level of perception that the whole magic show of that feeling sense of self starts. Again, not to say that's a problem, just to begin to recognize: oh yeah, sense of self starts with perception.

Perception leads to how we think about things, citta. How we think about things leads to our views, our opinions. So the view of self, the view of identity—sakkāya-diṭṭhi in Pali, identity view—is just being created moment to moment. It's not some lasting thing, but arising in a moment out of perception.

And when there's a moment of being attached, clinging to perception—we may not recognize it, but back to that blanket, the blue-green blanket, my insistence that it's blue, the way I couldn't see it otherwise—there's still a kind of clinging to that perception. Or maybe not to the perception so much as to that subtle sense of "but I'm right." So that's already into a view. It goes just like that: I'm right. But it starts by clinging to perception.

And just like that fast, when the thoughts have hardened or coagulated into a view, there can be a subtle clinging—just that little sense of "this is how it is, I'm right"—and our open awareness kind of snaps shut, is how it feels to me. I stop really noticing fresh. Like, say, listening to the music and I'm really trying, and then all of a sudden I get tired and go, "Well, that's really interesting, but I just can't appreciate it. I don't know how to appreciate it." And something just turns off. The freshness isn't there anymore. The open awareness isn't there anymore.

In terms of ourselves, what happens when we have a view—well, I'll get to that later—it's what I call selective perception. It snaps shut. So if there's a sense of "me, I'm so angry," and we've attached to that without really looking at how that whole thing got created, but just "oh, I'm so angry"—which is either "I'm so bad" or "I'm so good," but "I'm so angry"—then do you notice how, instead of just the open perception noticing whatever's arising, there's what I call selective perception? The awareness, the consciousness, starts picking up and noticing whatever particular sense, experience, or thought arises that reaffirms the view that the mind is attaching to at that moment.

"I'm such an angry person." And then all the memories will come of all the angry times, if you're identifying as bad. Or if "I'm so angry because they're acting so inappropriately," then all the different ways they're being inappropriate will come up. And all the other times—which are probably a lot more—when there's no anger, nothing special going on, or you're feeling loving, those don't seem to come into the mind at that time. Or if they do, they're dismissed.

It's actually a great moment—someone just shared this today—when you have the habit of getting lost and identified with any particular self-description like that. "I'm so angry, I'm so bored," whatever. And it starts, and you're in it, and "this is how I really am, this is my core." And suddenly, from practice, from all the times it hasn't been, something comes up: "But that's not true. It's not true I'm always like this. Just five minutes ago I wasn't like this." Wow! It starts to break apart.

So, starting with perception and then moving from that, I want to talk a little about when we can begin to get interested in this felt sense of self. Not the thinking about it, not the idea, but the actual experience of it—this felt "me" or "mine."

Once I was sitting with Sayadaw U Pandita, and in that practice you note every moment. I was going along quite fine, and I just started noting whenever a sense of "me" would arise. I would just note it, because it's just another arising experience, just like anything. Sometimes it was an image, sometimes it was a felt sense, sometimes it was a thought. It's always something different, which is interesting to see.

So I tried—it was a mistake—I tried to describe to him, "Okay, and so I note whenever sense of 'me' arises." And they just, you know, he and the translator just cracked up. "Ha ha ha! She's noting atta! She's noting atta!"

Sense of self. Ha, ha, ha. There's no sense of self. Ha, ha, ha. It was what friends of mine would call a cross-cultural experience. We both just missed each other. But anyway, it was all right.

So the way I want to talk about recognizing this sense of self—I'm taking this way of speaking about it from Ajahn Buddhadasa, the great Thai meditation master, scholar, and forest monk who died in the nineties. I spent some time in his forest monastery in the eighties when I was in Thailand for a year as a nun. He was a scholar and, within the Thai Theravada tradition, a bit of a radical, a free thinker. He wrote a book that was translated into English as *Heartwood of the Bodhi Tree*, where he talks extensively about recognizing and exploring this sense of self.

This is what he said: "The sense of self is merely a condition that arises when there is grasping and clinging in the mind." I think that's such a great description. That's all it is—just a condition that arises when there's grasping and clinging in the mind. So what? It's no big deal. It comes, it goes when there's grasping and clinging. A friend of ours put it this way: I want, I need, therefore I am.

So this condition means it's a construction, a sankhara, a coming together due to conditions. And like any other condition, any other object, it can be recognized in awareness. Hearing, seeing, sense of self. We don't have to make it into this big deal: "Oh God, the sense of self is here. When am I ever going to get rid of it? It's here so much. I'm never going to get enlightened." And it just turns into this enormous thing. That actually takes the attention away from simply looking at: What am I calling sense of self? What's the experience right now?

This is almost prior to the whole construction, the whole story, the whole "I'm so this and that." It's just the original clinging. With awareness we can start to notice it. It can actually be fun to explore the arising and passing, the birth and death of sense of self.

Since the sense of self arises in a moment of clinging, it can arise with any sense contact, including the mind. It can be with anything. But I'm going to pick some simple examples where you can really see it clearly. Again, an example from my own experience, but it happens—arises and passes—hundreds of

times in a day. When we get into reactivity about it, assuming it's here so much or it's always here, it becomes so familiar that we don't really notice that every time, it's different too.

A very simple example: someone was telling me on another retreat that there was a bowl of candy out in the back. They were walking very mindfully through the dining room, and suddenly there was seeing—bowl of candy. They saw very clearly how a sense of me wanting candy arose, just like that. Just wanting and sense of me. Then they kept walking. The image of the candy faded, sense of me died. Birth and death, just like that. Notice it over and over.

Another little story, similar but a bit more expanded. I was on retreat here once some years ago—a while ago, because we used to have not all this homogeneity of green mugs, every mug the same. We used to have all different mugs that people had brought and left here. It was kind of fun. So I was on retreat, and I would walk in, take a mug, whatever—they were all different, different sizes, different everything. Nothing.

But partway into the retreat, a couple of months in, I took a mug, I'm drinking my tea in the morning, and suddenly the thought arose: this is really the perfect mug. It's the right color, it just fits my hand, it feels good to drink out of. And I really became aware of "me and my mug" arising in that moment. I could see the clinging, but instead of thinking, "Oh no, I shouldn't cling," I could just see it. Before that, stuff was just happening. And I asked myself, should I keep it? And the answer came: no, just put it down. I put it down. That birth ended. So that's birth and death of the sense of self.

Starting there, that's a very simple example of dependent origination—the middle part that we can watch—which is a profound teaching. I can't begin to teach it fully right now, but most of you are familiar, I know. The Buddha describes twelve links of how suffering, beginning with ignorance, arises and ends in death—in a moment.

In one of the ways it's described in the suttas, it unfolds over two or three lifetimes. But another way it can be seen, and this is how Ajahn Buddhadasa talks about it, is that especially the middle part, we can really, at times, see it happening in our experience.

Starting with ignorance and going to the middle part: there's consciousness and contact. There's a sense organ, object, consciousness, and contact. So in the case of that mug, there was touching. And contact leads to feeling tone—this isn't new information. Touching, pleasant. Feeling tone, without real awareness, gives rise to tanha, to craving, either wanting or wanting to get rid of. You feel that craving.

Now, Ajahn Buddhadasa describes how craving leads to grasping—that's just the stronger version. Someone said craving is leaning into, and grasping is when you grab hold. So Ajahn Buddhadasa describes that when we get to grasping, it becomes the feeling of "I and mine." We're leaning into, and then I grasp that mug. The birth: Carol, I and mine.

This leads to bhava, becoming, which Buddhadasa describes as the feeling of having and being—having

my mug, being I, having my mug. Each stage is just a little bit stronger than the one before. And from bhava comes birth. And from birth: old age, sickness, disease, and then death.

So you see how really quickly, in that moment, it went from sense contact to the pleasant, to the leaning into, the grasping, to the birth of Carol and her mug. Put it down, walked away, the whole thing died. Gone. Birth and death in a moment, really gone.

Now, this happens quickly. We're not always going to see it. Don't make yourself crazy, but sometimes we can. Ajahn Chah has a lovely way of describing it: all twelve links of dependent origination go so fast. It's like you're in a tree, and you fall out of the tree, and you pass twelve branches on the way down—whop, whop, whop—you hit the ground and land in suffering. You passed all twelve branches, but you didn't really have time to stop and examine each one. You just land—whop—here you are, in the middle of not getting what you want and suffering, or what you want is going away and suffering.

But with our mindfulness, the mindfulness can pop in at any time and we can really see this. And if we're not hating it or fearing it, it's really fascinating to watch.

So back to the same silly example of the mug. The next day I came in, and I did kind of look for that mug. Already there's a little complication. Before, it had just been free and easy and natural. I walked, I picked, I took.

There was just space. Now, though... and the mug was there. Oh, okay. So I took it. Drinking out of it, saying, "Oh, this is right. This is perfect." The whole nine yards again.

And then this time, I thought, "I think I will actually save this mug. I'll take it to my room. I can take it to my room." Now, in this retreat, I was moving really slowly. So taking it to my room—because that was the only way I could really be sure no one else took it, right?—my room was way at the end of what used to be the Catskills. So I thought, okay, I'll take it to my room. And then I thought, but if you take it to your room, by the time you creep down there and get the mug and creep back in here to breakfast, breakfast is over. This isn't going to work.

And so my mind's going, and it's all getting so complicated. I really was in the suffering of that. I mean, this isn't huge suffering, but how many times a day does the mind do this? And at some point: "Oh, you know what? Put it down. Put it down." And the whole thing just dropped away in that moment. I really put it down.

But this is a great chance to explore: what does that sense of self feel like? It's really the contraction of grasping itself, you could say. What had just been free and easy became restricted, contracted, complicated. I'm planning. I'm scheming. My attention's narrowed. There's tension. How do you get past all these people? Everything gets complicated and unpleasant because of—you know, it's not the mug—that sense of *I* contracting around that.

Watching the whole thing with mindfulness, honestly, no problem. Even watching all the complications of my mind, when the mindfulness comes in, the complication becomes: "Oh, look at that object, look how grasping creates sense of self, look how it creates complexity, isn't that interesting?" Put down the mug, watch it drop away, walk out, and notice the next time it arises. And you know, it's really fun to see. It arises, it fades and dies—over and over, hundreds of times a day.

So rather than judging it, or thinking if we do it right it's got to stop, we learn to start trusting more and more the power of the mindfulness, the awareness, to simply see: "Oh, this is just how the mind works in this situation." This is how what we call identification—it's really clinging to a perception or a thought or any of the sense experiences, any of the five aggregates Guy mentioned: consciousness, perception, any sankhāra, which is any emotional formation, vedanā. Often we're clinging to pleasant, or with tanha, pushing away, clinging to getting rid of the unpleasant feeling, not recognizing that and lost in the story.

But with each particular one, when the magic trick is seen through, it's like, "Oh, that's what's going on. This mug isn't going to make me happy for the rest of my life. It's just a magic trick." Put it down. It goes.

And on the other side of that—not the other side, but the alternative—just as, and this is back to Ajahn Buddhadasa, how he talks about it: just as it can get interesting to recognize birth and death of sense of self, how does it feel, what am I calling sense of self in this moment, hundreds of times in a day, so just as it's born, so it dies. He says it's really important that we recognize all the moments that are—now this is using Buddhadasa's language—what we call empty of sense of self, which is also true, maybe even more moments of a day.

So he's, in his way of talking, describing suññatā, which is usually translated as emptiness. He's describing that as meaning empty of sense of self. That's how he's describing emptiness.

And he says, moments where there is no particular sense of me or mine arising are not a state we have to create. These are just moments of simple—what you might call the mind—just being aware. This is truly normal and natural. It's a natural quality of our mind, just being aware when the attention isn't distracted in all this construction and concocting and creating around a particular clinging. It's not like some amazing state we have to achieve, some big explosive blowout experience to finally recognize and have a moment of anattā.

As much as we get interested in noticing the birth and death of self, notice the death of self and just these moments where nothing much else is happening. It's just these moments he's calling suññatā—empty of sense of self. And we're not distracted.

There's a word used sometimes in the suttas, not frequently. Again, Ajahn Buddhadasa was picking it up: atammayatā, which is translated as a state of not being made of that. I know it's a little complicated, but you could understand it as the mind that is not constructing, not fabricating, not concocting. Or as Ajahn Amaro describes it, it refers primarily to the quality of experience prior to all the subject-object division,

all the stories we tell. Just that moment of isness.

There are so, so many moments like that in every day, but we don't often notice them because our habit is to incline toward the concoctions. Inclining into whatever stories arise from attachment to a perception or a feeling or that little sense of self. The sense of self in itself is just another fabrication, another thing. It doesn't have to be a big story. But we tend to get more entranced by the stories, by the concoctions, and not quite notice just the simplicity of the silence of the non-concocting mind.

So again, as Buddhadasa is saying, do we notice? He says it's important to generate a contentment with what he calls voidness, this emptiness. We talk about noticing when experience is neither pleasant nor unpleasant, noticing when nothing's really happening—so what, you're aware. When there's no big whoop at all, pleasant or unpleasant, how often when there's nothing special do we kind of dull out, space out, find ourselves just waiting for the next me, the next birth of me to arise?

Are we uncomfortable in just that simple—even to say calm is too much—just the in-between, before anything special is happening? Notice: if a thought ends, a mood ends, a sensation ends, and it's just space, do you feel you've got to jump back to your breath? Jump back to something. Something's got to be going on. Fill up the space. Have something to note. Know what's happening. Can't just be space. It's like a little bit uncomfortable sometimes.

So he's saying start to notice the neutral, when so-called nothing is happening. Generate a contentment with that, or incline the awareness toward it. You might just notice the space between thoughts, or between actions. If you're eating, you probably jump up the second you finish your last bite—well, probably not here, you're all slowing down—but boom, jump up. Just take a minute. Just be in the space a minute. There's nowhere to rush to. The space between breaths, the space between experiences. Just beginning to find an ease with that.

And assuming, "Well, this is the moment that there's no me. I'm looking for the moment of..."—forget that. You'll do that, and that's another sense of self arising. Then that's just the next arising experience.

Buddhadasa again: Normally we don't notice this emptiness, this voidness of sense of self because we're so involved with experience, so involved with concocting conceptual thoughts. I love that word, concocting. It's kind of like putting things together, but it has a quality of throwing things together in some kind of weird way, concocting. So it doesn't give us a chance to recognize just the empty nature of awareness, the natural nature of awareness.

I want to read a description from the Buddha. I like this because—

Here the Buddha is describing how it is in his mind, how his mind perceives things, speaking to the monks. This passage is a little dense, but I hope you can stay with it. I love it. It's from the Anguttara Nikaya.

He's saying, "Thus, bhikkhus, the Tathagata" — meaning himself — "does not conceive of a visible thing as apart from sight." This is the corollary to the Bahiya Sutta, which you got a double dose of last week: "In the seen, there is only the seen." So he's describing how that is in his mind.

He does not conceive of a visible thing apart from sight. He does not conceive of something unseen. He does not conceive of a thing to be seen. He does not conceive about a seer. Do you get a sense of that? The seeing is just the seeing. He's not thinking about what else is there to see. He's not thinking about what isn't being seen. He's not thinking about a seer seeing that. Seeing is just what's happening.

And similarly for hearing, similarly for things sensed, similarly for a cognizable thing — he does not conceive of a cognizable thing, which is any mood, any emotion, any thought, as apart from cognition. So what's happening? Thinking is happening. He doesn't conceive of a thinker who's thinking a thought, or of something that's worth cognizing, or of something that is uncognized. "What is it I don't know? What could I know?" No — just cognizing is happening.

Can you imagine that? Just the peace of it. It's so simple we can't stand it, but just the peace of it. It's just this. And even the sense of self is simply something cognized in that moment. "Oh, sense of self." And the peace of it.

I'm going to read a few more things describing it in different ways. This is from *The Island*, that book by Ajahn Pasanno and Ajahn Amaro, but it's actually from a disciple of Ajahn Mun, another Thai forest master named Luang Por Dun. He's reformulating the Four Noble Truths. That might be a little grandiose, but I love the way he expresses it in terms of what we're talking about here.

"The mind that goes out in order to satisfy its moods is the cause of suffering." You know what that means? It goes out — like when Ajahn Chah says the mind goes out and disturbs the sound. Hearing is just hearing, but the mind that goes out and complicates is the cause of suffering.

"The result that comes from the mind going out in order to satisfy its moods is suffering" — the First Noble Truth.

"The mind seeing the mind clearly is the path leading to the cessation of suffering" — the Noble Eightfold Path.

"The result of the mind seeing the mind clearly is the cessation of suffering" — the Third Noble Truth.

I just like that as a very pragmatic way of tuning in to the Four Noble Truths. I find it very useful.

So what we're doing, what we're practicing here, is the mind learning to see the mind clearly. Without bias, without judgment — just how is the mind working? Nothing to be afraid of in it. Nothing to be afraid of about recognizing this sense of self. Because awareness is stronger.

Awareness can be with anything. Just keep on bringing in the awareness, and we see more clearly how the

mind is working. And as we recognize more fully how the mind is working, there's less and less suffering about it.

So, inclining the mind toward just some ease, some comfort, just some recognition with these—I call them little nothing-special moments. Instead of looking for the big light show, just the nothing-special moments. Or noticing when we're jumping out. Often, you know, any suffering sense of self and concoction feels better than just... peace. Just nothing. Because it's so familiar, the sense of me.

But again, back to Buddhadasa, Ajahn Buddhadasa. I think Guy mentioned those two Pali phrases: *ahanka ra* and *mamankara*. I-ing and my-ing. Notice they're verbs. I-ing and my-ing. Just constructions that the mind creates in a moment and then fall away when the conditions change. And they're changing all the time. So we're just here to explore that.

I want to read a couple of other ways of describing this, just to end. Just describing the simplicity of it.

This is from Ajahn Jumnian, another Thai forest master: "At some point, the mind becomes so clear and balanced that whatever arises is seen and left untouched with no interference. One ceases to focus on any particular content, and all is recognized as simply mind and matter—empty processes arising and passing away of their own. Perfect balance of mind with no reactions, and in this time there is no longer any doing."

Now, don't think about that as a goal to be reached and stayed in permanently. It's just a description of moments, the way the Buddha was talking when it's just this, and the mind doesn't go out and concoct a whole story about it. It's just this. Whatever arises is recognized and simply left untouched with no interference. One ceases to focus on any particular content, and all is recognized as simply mind and matter arising and passing away.

From Nyoshul Khenpo, the wonderful Tibetan Dzogchen master, he said this kind of recognition, this simplicity of awareness, is not something missing to be sought for and obtained, but is at the very heart of our essential nature. He calls it unfabricated, ordinary awareness. So don't go looking for something so special in these moments. Just unfabricated, ordinary awareness, unadulterated by effort and modification. Naked, fresh, vivid, and totally natural. What could be simpler than this?

That's the trouble, like I said before. It's so simple, we can't stand it. We want to go out and make a story. What could be simpler than this? So get out of the construction business.

In just little moments, just recognizing—the space, the silence, whatever way it comes for you, the calm, the nothing-special, the birth of self, the death of self, the creation, the complexification, the death of that—all of it is just mind and matter arising and passing. No need for interference.

And then this is from Dogen, the great Zen master, just to end: "To study the way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be enlightened by all things. To be enlightened by

all things is to dissolve the barriers that seem to exist between oneself and others."

So let's just sit quietly for a minute.

What could be simpler than this?

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