Concocting Sense of Self: An Exploration of Anattā

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 59:04

Last night, in part of her talk, Winnie described the quality of investigation—how it's not thinking about things, but this quality in the mind of really interested attention.

So tonight I'd like to, taking off on that, talk a bit about using this interest, this investigation, to explore in our own moment-to-moment experience one of the core teachings of the Buddha, one of the freeing teachings: that of anattā, so-called not-self. Everybody's favorite subject. But it's so freeing. And it makes people a little bit nuts when we don't really just look at our experience, but when we think about it.

The Buddha wasn't teaching philosophical concepts. He wasn't saying, "Let me give you some new things to think about." The understanding of anattā, of not-self—we don't come to that recognition by thinking about it. But that's what we try to do, think our way out of it, and it just spins and spins and spins until we feel a little nutsy about it. It is definitely a loaded concept.

As soon as we bring up not-self, a lot of people's practice becomes like they're trying to get rid of the self. "I know there's not a self, but I still have one. So how do I get rid of it?" The sense of self came up, and so it's as if there's something here that, once we really break through some barrier and have some blowout experience, just completely gets rid of the sense of self—and then you're home free. Are you waiting for that? Or else there's the question: when the self goes, who knows where the car keys are? Stuff like that, all those endless questions. I think I made my point.

But what I really hope this talk can do is serve as an invitation to drop all the ideas and the concepts and the worry, and just actually bring an interested, mindful attention to exploration of sense of self. Just discovering, exploring it, seeing what's actually going on there. Because—and this might not be news—it's not that you have to get rid of yourself. There's not one. It's already like that.

It's just like impermanence. It's not like everything's permanent and once you see it, then everything starts changing all of a sudden. It's the same with not-self. Really, at the heart of our not quite understanding, our mistaken relating to experience as if there's some lasting, self-existing self, is that we don't perceive accurately. All that changes—reality doesn't change, but our perception shifts. We perceive wrongly, and then we think and act and carry on and react from that. Without actually just taking a look at what's really going on, we're lost in a world of assumptions and misperceptions without even recognizing it.

So that's the way I want to invite us to explore tonight. This is an invitation to investigate, just with

mindfulness, not with thinking about it. First: what is the experience in any moment that you notice, that I'm labeling or calling "me" or "mine"? Not pretending we're not having that experience. Doesn't it arise frequently? The sense of me, the sense of mine. And also, just bring interest, awareness to moments of experience—to a moment when there isn't a sense of me or mine.

To use Ajahn Buddhadasa's language—he was a great Thai forest monk and meditation teacher—he talks about moments that are empty of a sense of self. Empty in that way. He's not saying we have to stop having or experiencing a sense of self, because we do. It comes up all the time. But I don't know how it is for you—for me, and I know I'm not the only one, the sense of me or mine is so familiar that often we either don't notice it, or it's so familiar we assume it's always here, not noticing when it's not. And we don't really look at what we're calling me or mine. It's simply another arising saṅkhāra, another arising experience. But when we take something for granted, when it's so familiar, we stop looking. "Oh, here I am again." What are you even calling me? If someone grabbed you and said, "What are you calling me?" you may not even know, because it's just assumed. Here it is. I didn't get rid of it yet.

So our job is to get interested—not hating, not with pre-assumptions or preconceptions—but just to see what actually, in this moment only, not a whole philosophical treatise, in this moment, this sense of me... what's the actual experience, just right now? Bring mindfulness and wisdom, sati-paññā, right to that point.

Ramana Maharshi expressed it this way: "The idea of self is like a ghost caused by the play of shadows. Look closely and the ghost vanishes. It was never there. So also with the sense of separate 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."

This is really a great description of our practice—to look closely. But not even assuming it doesn't exist. Just look closely at what we're calling me, I, mine in any particular moment.

The rest of the talk I want to offer comes from a couple of different angles, and you may find your own way in.

What's interesting about the sense of me is that, starting from misperception, it's a concoction. I like that word. It's just made up of a bunch of different experiences strung together really quickly, concocted out of a moment of sense contact with grasping. There are hundreds of these concoctions of me or mine throughout any day. But when we really look closely, we can see the arising and the strands that come together, and how they come apart again when conditions change.

There's one sutta where the Buddha talks about consciousness as being like a magic show. The sense of self is the same way—like a magic show. He describes being at a crossroads back in his time, where there's somebody putting on a magic show. You sit and watch, amazed, wondering how they do that. It seems so real. But if you could go behind the curtain and see how it's all put together, the whole sense of reality is

gone. The sense of wonder vanishes. You see they're doing this, they're doing that—that's how they create this illusion. It's exactly like that with our sense of self.

The way I want to start exploring this tonight is really from the point of perception, which we've talked about a bit—where this concoction begins for us. I just happen to love that word *concoction*. In English, it has a sense of a bunch of stuff thrown together, perhaps without much pre-planning, not exactly a recipe which is all planned out, but grabbing a little of this and a little of that and throwing it all together. And here you have a sense of me—a little haphazard.

Starting with perception: we've discussed it as one of the five aggregates, a mental quality arising in every moment of sense contact. It's that quality of recognition based on memory, discernment, which usually leads to thinking.

Now, perception is definitely useful. In a way, it's how we define our immediate world, how we place ourselves in experience. When you heard the bell ten minutes ago, you not only recognized "bell," you knew it was the bell at a certain time of day. The whole context came with it—you're supposed to come in here and listen to a Dhamma talk. You know who you are and where you are and why. There's a whole lot that comes into that perception of bell.

It's useful, right? If you had to figure it out every time you heard a bell—"Right, okay, I know it's a bell, but what does it mean? And who am I?"—or if you walked in here thinking, "I'm in here, but there's no me, so which zafu do I sit on?"

At this relative level, perception is extremely useful. No one's saying we want to get rid of it. And the thoughts that come with it, that give us context—again, extremely useful. We couldn't get along without it. Sometimes we start to think, "Oh, got to get rid of that." Not at all. But we want to understand it.

The tricky thing with perception is that, first of all, it's personal. It's informed by our life experiences, by our past. There's a lot of cultural conditioning in perception. So there's not one accurate perception that's true—which we want, this one accurate truth that's the same for everybody. We can trust our perception so completely, not knowing that it may not be the same for other people. It's actually kind of amazing to me how much we manage to do things together, given how different our perceptions can be.

I was at a friend's house, a good friend, and she had a blanket thrown over the back of her couch. I said, "Oh, could you hand me that blue blanket?" She looked at me puzzled. "What blue blanket?" "On the back of the couch." "No," she said, "that's green."

We really went back and forth about it. I could not switch my perception and see it as green. It was a blue blanket, no two ways about it. But she couldn't switch and see it as blue either. So is there some accurate truth somewhere in between? It's aquamarine and we're both partially right? Who knows?

That's a simple example, very simple. And our perception in that moment wasn't even colored by greed or

aversion. But throw a moment of greed or aversion into the mix and that can completely distort everything. The kilesas—never mind delusion—completely distort perception.

Do you have a sense of this? When you're really angry at somebody, really angry, and you look at them, the way they look becomes ugly. They didn't used to be ugly, but now they're ugly. You just see it that way. Or when you're really infatuated with someone and you look at them—oh, just everything about them is so endearing! The way they shuffle their feet, the way they slop their food around, it's all so endearing. I don't know where that came from.

But when the wanting isn't in the mind anymore, you hope you didn't make too many strong commitments while it was there. A friend of mine made a really good comment about this. She's been married for a while, good friends of mine, and they're very committed—it's a good marriage. But she said, "You know, the dynamics change. A few years in, for both of us, the love eyes are gone. The love glasses are off." Which didn't mean they don't love each other, but those love glasses where you see everything as just so lovely—that perception shifts.

This is where wars and views start: from perception that we believe is simply how things are. It's so easy to attach to perception. Grasping can come into perception. "No, that's a blue blanket." That's grasping. Right then, with the arising of that grasping of perception, there's a sense of *me* taking a stand on the blue blanket.

I could give a whole talk on views, which I would love to do, but this isn't it. You can really draw this out and see how quickly we're at war—attachment to views, often based simply on perception, and right away that sense of me arises.

As the Buddha goes on to say, what we perceive, we think about. We do. What we think about, we complicate—with associations and memories of perceptions. This is what becomes papañca, the whole proliferating story. It's the concoction arising from perception and clinging, not recognizing whether it's accurate or not, spinning into a whole sense of me. And it doesn't have to be particularly negative or troublesome. Just see how it happens. Get interested.

Let me give you a simple example. I was in Burma at a meditation center, walking up a little path toward a Bodhi tree that had been planted with a concrete circular wall around it where people walk in circumambulation. I was just walking up, not even as far as to the back wall, and there was a Burmese nun walking around, circumambulating the tree with her hands in añjali. I see that—that's my perception. The nun walking around the Bodhi tree like this.

And there was a sense of happiness, of faith. "Isn't that so lovely, that sense of faith?" I had a whole series of thoughts as I was walking. "That sense of faith, it's just so touching that she's walking around like this."

And then, for whatever reason, another thought arose: "It's just a tree. She's walking around worshipping a tree. What kind of faith is that?" This all happened in the space of about two seconds.

That thought came up, I grabbed hold of it, and there was a little bit of unpleasant vedanā with that thought. I grasped that, and the whole sense of self shifted. As I was walking up, those were two distinct concoctions of self that were created.

They weren't the same one. One was a sense of me really filled with faith and happiness, and then it turned into something a little bit aversive—my opinions and views about trees and faith and blind faith and all of that. That wasn't the same concoction. Those were two separate concoctions.

I got up there and then I had an accurate perception, which is she was walking around texting on her cell phone. The world has changed. And so I just laughed. And with that, the whole concoction dissolved. It just dissolved. When there's accurate perception like that, all the worldview that was built on the inaccurate perception just dissolves away. You don't have to get rid of anything. It's like, "Oh, that." And just in that moment, the whole sense of self dropped away too. I didn't do anything with it. It was just gone. It's great, you know, and then there was just a moment of no particular concoction.

So when the perception is accurate in that moment, the whole magic show, the whole concoction of sense of me, just falls apart. Because there's nothing to hold it together. It's not like you have to get rid of anything, but you see that this whole construct of perception and liking and disliking and thoughts—you know, it could go on a lot longer than two seconds—when you see what's accurate, the whole thing just goes away. When the clinging goes away, the whole thing goes away. You don't have to do anything, you don't have to get rid of sense of self, you don't have to worry about it coming. We just get interested in watching how that happens.

So this is the essence really of insight—a shift of perception. It's not about breaking through to some new world where there's not a self and everything's impermanent. It's a shift of perception over and over and over. It's like those pictures where they draw a thing, and if you look one way you see a vase, and if you look another way you see two profiles of faces. You can usually see one or the other, but you usually can't see both at the same time. But once you've recognized each, both modes of perceiving can be recognized in that experience. Or like those magic eye pictures where 3D hockey players pop out if you look at it correctly. Until you can do that, all you see is just little abstract forms. And if you can't do it—like my mother, for example, could never do it, and it drove her crazy—you never know that's there. You only perceive in one way. But when you perceive the other way, even if you can't always, it shifts something in our mind stream, in our understanding. We may still have many more moments of perception the other way, kind of like the relative way of looking—me, me, me, I, I, I, mine, mine, mine. There's a lot of that. But there's that sense of knowing it's a construction. It's coming and going and we can see that. It takes the oomph out of it. You don't have to be so afraid or aversive or try to get rid of sense of self. It's just another arising mental formation. Sankhāra—the sankhāra aggregate—like anything else. We make such a big deal about it by not looking at it, by assuming permanence, by really grasping at it and identifying.

So we want to explore that. That's what I want to talk about here.

Ajahn Buddhadasa—by the way, he wrote a wonderful book about much of this, translated into English and called *Heartwood of the Bodhi Tree*. Not now, but later, if you're really fascinated, you might want to have a look. I use a lot of the way he talks about things when I talk about it. So he says: the sense of self is simply a condition that arises when there is grasping and clinging in the mind. Explore and look for yourself when there's grasping and clinging in the mind. It's simply a condition, a process, like anything else that we experience—a mental, physical process that we can explore by simply bringing mindfulness, truth-discerning awareness, to when you have a moment where you feel "me." Instead of going off into a whole reaction to it, just turn around and recognize in that moment—not thinking about it, but bringing awareness to what's "me" in this moment. Sometimes it just feels like a little physical contraction of grasping.

Sometimes there's a mental image. Sometimes the thing that's clung to—which is often a thought or a description of oneself or a mood—is the thing one sees: "Well, that's me." But just notice, because then you'll start to recognize that each time it's something different. It's not the same thing that you're always coming back to, and that's really interesting to see.

So the sense of self, mere mind, can be born when there's contact—consciousness making contact with any of the six sense objects—and there's craving. It doesn't have to be born, but it can occur with anything, gross or subtle, and it really doesn't matter what. The sense of self is born hundreds of times a day with contact with any sense impression, and it dies equally as many times as it's born. There's not the one that didn't die hanging around in the background. Equally, it dies. And it can get really fun to just keep noticing it.

This is just an aside. I tried once when I was on a retreat with Sayadaw U Pandita, where you note every moment, giving a very soft label to whatever's arising—a very, very strict Burmese Abhidhamma way of understanding things. So I was doing this, what I'm describing. I had no sense of me, and I'd notice, "Oh, self," and it would be like a sensation or an image or a thought. And it was really helpful because it was just blasting apart any sense of permanence. But I should have known better. Anyway, I tried to describe to him what I was doing. I said, "Oh yes, I'm noting sense of self whenever I see it." He and the translator got a big kick out of that. "Ha ha ha, you think there's self! Ha ha ha, she thinks there's self!" I never could get that across. But I hope I can get it across to you, because it was really interesting. It was. It is—to see how it's born and dies over and over.

I'll give this simple example that I use a lot because it's just so mundane, but that's where we can really explore here on retreat, watching this. This was on retreat here quite some time ago. You know how it is—you go in, you get a mug. But this was a long time ago. We didn't have all this uniformity of crockery that we have now. At that time, there was the same shelf with mugs, but just whatever people had left here over the years. So every one was different. You'd go and get a mug.

I'd been on retreat a long time—it was a three-month, I guess. Take a mug, get my tea, do my thing, sit

down. It was just all very simple and smooth, and I wasn't really paying any attention. It didn't matter. But one day, as I was drinking my tea, the sense of pleasant feeling about that particular mug came up, and I sort of half noticed it, half not—like Joseph calls "more or less mindfulness." It isn't really. I didn't notice the craving. Immediately: "This feels really good on my hand. This is the perfect mug, and the color's nice too." And I could feel in that moment this whole movement—it goes just from pleasant feeling to liking it, to grasping it, to trying to think about how I can save it, how can I have it tomorrow, what can I do. All like that. That's the birth of self. And I started thinking, "How can I keep it? Maybe I can go put it in my..." Too much trouble. Put it down. I put it down, took it to the dish room, left—death of self, right there.

And that's the whole dependent origination, right there. We haven't gone into it a lot, but just the middle part of it—where the Buddha described how we can watch the chain of suffering arising from a moment of craving, of leaning in. This middle part, which we can watch over and over here in our practice, is where there's sense contact and there's a pleasant or unpleasant or neutral feeling. Without awareness, with pleasant we lean in—there's wanting. With unpleasant we lean away. Either is craving. It attaches us to the object either way. And then that craving strengthens to grasping, to really holding on, grasping right there. And that grasping—

is what Buddhadasa calls having and being. And that moves into becoming, into birth—birth of a sense of self—into suffering and death of self.

So if you don't think about this as a whole lifetime thing, but moment to moment to moment, just sitting there—ah, pleasant feeling, this is really nice, I like this mug—"me and my mug" is born in that moment. And then the grasping, the having and being, the person who has this mug, who wants to keep it. And then you put it down and walk away—death of self. So death of self isn't necessarily a suffering experience.

Notice when there's that sense of craving, clinging, grasping that comes in. And this is mild, right? This is where we can explore it. We're not talking about your most difficult personality pattern or the most important thing in your life, but it's the same process. To watch it here, to see what's the effect, to explore when you notice that—what does the grasping, the craving, feel like experientially? What's the effect in the mind, in the consciousness? We can really start to notice this.

For me, when it comes as "oh, my mug," we don't notice it initially because in that moment I was focusing on the pleasant feeling and all the concoctions of how can I get more and what can I do. We get enthralled by that whole view and the stories, the papañca, not noticing the actual effect. What had been simple and easy—walking in, quite present, relaxed, fairly equanimous, noticing what was happening—suddenly everything kind of zooms in and narrows. Mentally, physically, you can almost feel it. I can feel wanting, grasping in the mind. It's like a physical contraction. It feels like, almost half the time, that's what sense of self is for me—this physical contraction. What had been wide open and noticing whatever becomes really zoomed in, restricted. Consciousness is restricted when there's wanting and aversion in the mind. The Buddha described it this way. We can experience it. Not with judging, just to see. What had been open and

wide becomes really centered on this little green mug. It becomes the most important thing in the universe just for that second. Put it down, walked away.

But the next day, I didn't totally put it down. I walked away and pretended I wasn't looking for it, but I just kind of—you know, you pretend you're not. This is denial, but it doesn't really quite work. Saw it easily, took it up, went through the whole thing again. And this time I really started thinking about how I could save it. So what had been simple got really quite complicated.

Well, you can't leave stuff on the windowsills even then, so I'd have to take it to my room, which I could certainly do. But I was doing a very slow style of practice. And it would take me—I'm not exaggerating—to walk from the dining room to my room, twenty, thirty minutes easily. I thought, okay, I'm going to take it to my room. And then before every meal, I have to walk back there. So it's like an hour to go back, get the mug, come back. I thought about it for a while, for a few minutes. Then I said, you know what? Forget it. Put it down, and then it really went.

And there's that sense of ease, of space, of peace, when there's not the concoction of self going on, when we put it down. That's equally important to notice. Because just as there are many, many moments in a day where there's birth and death of the sense of self, there are also many—and this is coming back to Buddhadasa again—many, many moments which he talks about that are empty of sense of self.

He says, in translation, that this is truly normal and natural. It's not some special esoteric state of mind or heart we have to create. We think, "I have to have a moment where there's no sense of self, where there's no self"—we don't even say "sense of self," we say "self." "I want a moment where there's no self, because it's always here." But that's because we don't look and see. As Buddhadasa says, it's really normal and natural. It's the natural state of mind and heart when we're not distracted by our reactions to sense contact, by our likings and our dislikings and what we think about it, our perceptions and all of that concoction.

When we're not distracted by that, there's no sense of me or mine coming up. And you can't make a big project of it, because then it becomes a "me" trying to look for something. But just let it go there, kind of in the back of your mind, to see how often, how many times a day, those moments arise when maybe nothing special is going on. It may be a pleasant experience or an unpleasant experience—it doesn't matter what's happening. But often there's a kind of pleasantness to it, the pleasantness of non-clinging, the pleasantness of that non-narrow, non-gripping quality of consciousness, when everything isn't zoomed in and focused on something.

We each describe it in different ways, although sometimes we don't quite recognize what's happening. It's simply a moment of non-concoction of self.

We tend to think—whether in sitting meditation or any other time, drinking tea, going to the bathroom, walking, whatever—we tend to think, "Oh, it just wasn't so easy," and there's that kind of struggle. You're

trying to notice, you're trying to be with things, you're trying to get it right. We all know that one. Then you have a sitting or a walking or a dance, and it's just flowing. It's all just coming and going. "Finally, I'm getting it right." We have to add that. We just can't leave well enough alone.

But that sense of how it's going, how it's going right—our habit is really to make something of it about me. So it may be just free and easy for a moment, but we may not quite notice what's free and easy: things are happening without adding a me or my story on top of it, not needing to react to whatever's occurring.

But then pretty soon, our tendency, for many of us, is to get kind of seduced, distracted back into the sense contact or the content about it. And then it's like, "Okay, so I have to describe this in my interview. What's actually going on is like this, and how's the mindfulness, and how's that, and how can I make it happen again?" And all of that starts again.

But just noticing in those simple moments that there's no me or mine arising in that moment. Sure, it comes after—that's okay. But many, many moments throughout the day there's just the sense of, I don't know, isness. Things are as they are. It may be calm, it may be something difficult happening, but the concoction of me isn't occurring around it.

You might notice when the grasping of me dissipates. It's not something we do, but it dissipates. Notice the difference.

Here's an example: my system is kind of sensitive to cold, and I tend to get a little aversive around it. I can watch that happen, that pattern. So if I'm out walking and there's cold wind—the other day I was out walking and it was cold wind—I'm aware of the cold wind, but I could see my body tensing and the aversion. And the little voice says, "Ah, it's hard for me being in the cold wind." So that's the whole construction of a sense of me from the unpleasant vedanā. And then my memories, my perception of my body and my past history, and I don't like it. It's very fast, you know. And so there was a little bit of struggle watching it, but that's the sense of me.

And then at some moment, really what I did was just get a little more mindful. Instead of going more into those thoughts, feeding those thoughts—and hating the thoughts is also feeding them. You know that, right? "I shouldn't be having all these thoughts about me." Same difference. It doesn't matter. Instead of giving them attention, I just let the awareness come back to the sensations of cold, just the bare sensations. Sati-paññā right at the sense contact, not in order for something, just to be here with what was happening.

And in that moment, just being with the sensations of vibrating and cool or whatever, the grasping, the aversion just dissipated because it wasn't being fed. And then there's just this sense of coolness and sensations and walking and no real sense of self in that.

This isn't some amazing liberating moment. But it's moments that we experience so frequently. So just let it in a little bit, because again this is also recognizing aniccā, impermanence. And what really starts to cut through our misperception—our misperception of self as a solid thing, and our misperception that it's

steady, constant—is when we see that something's coming and going all the time. That just starts to get in cellularly, and we just can't take it so seriously anymore.

It's really amazing how seriously, as soon as I'm in here—that whole issue, whatever it is, a mug or the pain in your back or the mood you're having or it's fall and everything's dying, whatever it is—becomes so serious. And when the clinging goes, when buying into that whole concoction dissipates, it's just what it is. Even if all the same sense contact is still there. The misperception goes away, and that changes everything.

So, just letting it be in the back of your mind: when we're not distracted, when we're not seduced and obsessed by sense contact and our reactions to it, it's just normal and natural that there's no particular sense of self coming, because it's a created experience. It's a concoction that's fed by greed, by aversion, and by delusion.

We're all getting really familiar with these as our good friends. They accompany us a lot of the time—greed, hatred, and delusion—but not all the time. And so that's why we try to emphasize how important it is to see these torments when they're in the mind, because they distort perception, they lead to all this papañca and assumptions and suffering. But it's equally important to notice when they're not present, when there's wholesomeness in the mind—whether it's equanimity or concentration or mindfulness or calm or mettā, whatever. Just to notice both the presence and the absence of the confusing and of the wholesome.

Buddhadasa also talks about noticing this to generate a contentment with these moments of emptiness. Because they're not like some big event usually. A lot of times you may notice, "Okay, nothing much," and we're kind of waiting for the next big arising of self. Even if it's suffering—nothing's really going on, and we're waiting for something to happen. There's nothing. Have you noticed?

I'm probably not the only one whose mind does this. In a somewhat calm period, you're present, there's that little bit of sense that not much is going on, and you don't quite notice it. Then the mind comes up with some cockamamie story—a suffering one even—something that didn't even happen that you could get really angry about if it was going to happen. And you sit there and the mind's spinning it out and you think, "What is going on?" It's like, "I'd rather have a suffering sense of self than no sense of self," because it's just so familiar. But once you notice it, you can't take it too seriously anymore.

There's a sutta from the Buddha that I really like because he's describing how his mind works, in the sense of the magic show not being created. He says, "The Tathagata"—that's how he refers to himself—"does not conceive of a visible thing as apart from sight." Do you get that? There's seeing, the experience of seeing. He does not conceive—the commentary says he does not imagine—a thing out there to be seen in its own right. He does not conceive of that. So there's just seeing. He does not conceive of a seer. In other words, he does not conceive of being an agent behind the seeing. So that just doesn't arise in his mind.

There's seeing. He's not thinking, "Here I am doing the seeing, seeing that." Our habit is to do that—"Here I

am seeing that." But I'm not saying this so you can get in a fight with that habit. We can simply see that it's just another arising thought.

This is what's so cool about awareness. It's not like awareness has to stop and say, "Oh no, here I am conceiving about being the agent of seeing—it's all over, I'm caught in sense of self, hang it up." Right there, bring in the interest and see, "Oh, okay, what's that sense of self right there? Oh, you just feel some grasping." You don't have to deconstruct the whole sense of the seer and the seeing and what does it mean and the Buddha doesn't think it and is there something out there or not and if a tree falls in the forest and nobody hears it, does it really make a sound. You don't have to do any of that.

You can just notice. The seer and the seen, and "Oh my god," a sense of me feels like this. Satipaññā, right there. Right there. You never have to go anywhere else. All it takes is the willingness to keep turning around and looking, to keep turning around and looking. What are we calling that sense of me?

So, as I said, one way is exploring that sense of grasping when it arises in the body. Notice, if it's true for you, how it can tend to narrow the mind, the consciousness, make a sense of limit, of separation.

Just explore that. See how it is when there's suddenly an arising of a sense of me that wasn't there before. Instead of going "oh no," just see what that's like. See what it's made of. See if it really comes and goes. Don't believe me. Look and see. See if you can find the same sense of self all the time. Come back and tell us. You know, maybe this is all wrong and there's really something. Look and see for yourself.

Because it doesn't change anything for any of us just to hear it—we all know that really well. But to just get interested and explore, to see what some of the things are that we tend to grasp at. That's why the five aggregates, when they're called the five aggregates of grasping, it's exactly that. The five ways the Buddha broke up our experience to talk about it. And at any moment, when one of them is the site around which grasping comes, that's where the sense of self arises.

But we can explore very simply. Body is obvious—we've talked about that a lot. You can see when there's an unpleasant sensation and go, "Ah, my knee hurts," just feeling that contraction around it. Or as Andre was talking about, often we have an image of the body that's not the body at all. We'll have an image of "I don't like the way my hair looks today." That's actually not the body—that's a mental experience. But unpleasant vedana, we grasp at it.

Just notice. I have a dear friend who lost her leg to cancer a couple of years ago, a long-term practitioner. And she's used it as such a fascinating exploration, seeing how her mind works. It's going, "How could she say that's me?" But it feels like some part of me is gone, yet it certainly can't be me. And then, of course, there's the whole weirdness of phantom pain, which is a totally bizarre thing. She has that quite strongly. Walking—she loves to walk. She walks and hikes all over the mountains, I want you to know, on her prosthetic leg. She's planning a trip to Ladakh where she'll hike for five days. She's doing great. But there are times she can hardly walk because the leg that isn't there hurts so much when she takes a step. What

the heck's going on? How can we call that me? It's just experience, kind of an empty space.

Vedana, the pleasant-unpleasant-neutral, is a big place where this sudden grasping can come in and we don't notice it because it's so quick. Most of the examples I've given have been that. It's so fast. Have you noticed, as we've talked about it, how really quick and ephemeral this pleasant feeling is, this unpleasant feeling? It's so quick, just like that, arising and passing in every moment, different feelings.

But as Ajahn Buddhadasa says again, notice the wave-like nature of pleasant feeling. It comes and goes so quickly. And then he says, just at times, contemplate your life. How many of the decisions you've made have been to get more pleasant feeling? And it's so nothing. It's really amazing to have a look at it like that.

But as you start to see the pleasant feeling and how the grasping comes around it so quickly, it leads into the whole world of emotions and thoughts and the stories about ourselves and personality view, just like that. Chökyi Nyima, who is a wonderful Tibetan teacher—Rinpoche, he's Chökyi Rinpoche's brother—he says, "Watch the fickleness, the unfaithfulness of the mind, how easily it is influenced just by a pleasant or unpleasant sight, sound, thought, into an immediate mood." Can you notice that?

Just so quickly we can go from a little bit of unpleasant feeling to the whole mood of our life. Have you noticed that here? Any sense contact can do it.

Once I was on retreat—I don't remember what time of year it was—but I was sitting in pretty quiet surroundings, and I heard crickets. Just the sound of crickets. I was aware of the hearing, aware of the perception of crickets, and it had, for some reason, a kind of poignant quality. I'm not even sure if it was pleasant or unpleasant, but there was a vedana that I grasped at, and immediately, from crickets, I went into this whole story of autumn and the ending of things and the poignancy of life and how you can't count on anything. You know that kind of mood? Nostalgia and sadness. I was kind of wallowing around in it. Me, me, me. Just like that—from a sense contact and an unpleasant feeling.

And then I noticed it.

So I went back, because the sound was still happening, and I said, "Crickets." And then I deliberately thought, "Isn't it wonderful to be able to hear nature in a place like this? Isn't it lovely that the trees are turning red?" I deliberately brought up pleasant thoughts, and just from the pleasant feeling of those thoughts, immediately all the moods followed. Just like that, just as real as the other one. "I'm so lucky to be here in this beautiful place in nature in the fall." It was just as real as the other—maybe thirty seconds apart. How can we take this stuff so seriously? But it's really fun to see how it happens, just from a quick little vedana that we don't notice.

This is from Ajahn Sumedho. He's talking about just such an example. 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."

Do you get a sense of what he's saying? He's not saying there's some solid me out there. It's a view, a series of thoughts that say "this is how it is" that we hold to as being true. And it's just a sense experience, a sankhara arising in consciousness. That's all it is. Turn around and look at it.

He says, "But when I recognize that, then I'm no longer taking refuge in being a personality, in my views, in my opinions. And then as that dissipates, the world of Ajahn Sumedho ends." That doesn't mean Ajahn Sumedho dies, or the world ends, or that I'm unconscious. In Buddhadhamma, "the world" means the world that our mind is creating in consciousness—which is why we can seem to be living in different worlds.

So our refuge then is no longer in being Ajahn Sumedho. Our refuge is in this awareness, rather than in trying to sustain refined experiences in consciousness as our refuge, because you can't do it.

And I want to say this: we're talking about one moment of refuge in this moment of awareness. Don't extend it into the future with thoughts like "I can't do it." Just in one moment.

When I saw that whole world of nostalgia and crickets, when I just saw that as a concoction arising in consciousness, that mindfulness right there—that steady mindfulness—became the condition for wisdom to come by itself. The clear recognition, the accurate perception, comes by itself. You don't have to try and create it. It's like, "Oh, concoction." And it dissipates. In that moment there's refuge in awareness. There's nothing else in that moment one needs to do.

Just continue to keep exploring how these worlds, these worldviews arise and change. I've given you a couple of examples; there are millions. And even the most difficult emotional and personality patterns can be seen this way.

Right now in the retreat this last week, it seems like really a lot of you—and it's kind of normal at this time in retreat—are finding that deep and difficult emotional patterns, personality patterns, are coming up into awareness. When Andrea talked about yogi mind, sometimes that can trigger really deep suffering, because some little event can activate a pattern we've experienced our whole life with a great deal of belief. And it's hard.

This is part of practice—to see it. Even that, even when you feel like you're spinning and lost in it and it feels just unworkable, if you can keep on bringing mindfulness right to the sense door, you'll see that none of these are lasting that long. They may be coming up frequently, but in between your horrible self-hatred, there'll be a moment when you're just sitting there thinking, "What's for lunch?" We tend not to notice that. We think, "Oh, it's been all day. When can I go to bed?" And then you start thinking for a while about your vacation last year, and then you come back to "Oh my god, this is..." But just notice that. Just notice—it doesn't mean it isn't painful. But just because it's painful doesn't mean it's any more me than the other.

So just trusting the steadiness of awareness, the accurate perception will come in. It can't help it. That's

why the continuity is so important. Accurate perception isn't changing what's happening—it's seeing what's happening more clearly for how it is. And this is where we begin to be able to trust the awareness, to take refuge more and more. It's hard when something is so difficult or so familiar, when we're so sucked in and just spinning in it, to take refuge in awareness, because sometimes you feel the difficulty more clearly. But that's, as we start to see, impermanent as well. It's painful sensation, it's painful vedanā, but it's changing too.

The awareness and the clear seeing is so freeing from the confusion that comes from this holding to a sense of self that the trust, the faith, just gets stronger and stronger. Ajahn Sumedho says we're taking refuge in the awareness.

So just to end with another invitation: as much as you notice, it can be fun—play with it. Noticing birth and death of self, explore what's the concoction, what's the grasping to at the moment, and really give yourself the space to notice other moments when there is no concoction going on. There's plenty of those moments. They may be calm, they may seem a little spaced out, but there's awareness there. Not the moments when you're really zoned, but when there's awareness—just no big concoction.

Notice if you're kind of leaning into the next experience. Give yourself a moment of space. You finish one bite of food—give it a second before you put in the next one, if that's possible. When you finish eating, if you notice your mind going, "Okay, now go wash the dishes," just take a moment. Notice the space between activities. I don't mean create three hours between activities, but just notice. You're feeling your breath, you're aware of thinking, a thought's like this—it ends. Just be aware for a moment of the space, without having to jump onto the next arising experience because God forbid another thought might come.

Just be content with voidness, as Buddhadasa says. Be content with these moments where there's no particular sense of self. The moment between birth and death, the moments between thoughts—just appreciating that.

I'll end with this little line I like. It doesn't really fit, but I like it, so that's how it goes. From Mary Oliver: "Love yourself, then forget it, then love the world." That's how it works. When we're not all wrapped up in these births and deaths of ourself and we're not fighting them, then there's the space to love the world.

Thank you for listening.

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