Investigating Sense of Self

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:01:25

As Jaya said last night, this is the requisite talk on anatta. But as it happens, I really enjoy exploring and talking about this—let's say concept, though it's not really a concept. It's just a pointing to our direct experience, the whole sense of not identifying with experience as a lasting sense of self.

The idea of anatta is often one that people's minds can get kind of stuck around. Just as Jaya said last night, the perception of impermanence leads to freedom. So too is the perception of anatta, of not-self. But our minds can get so caught—maybe yours not—in this whole idea of: if there's no self, who's driving my car? If there's no self, how will I know where I live? If there's no self, will everything fall apart? All of that kind of stuff.

Or you're struggling. Every time you notice a sense of self, it's "Ah, another failure." Again the sense of self—will it ever go away? You're waiting for the big explosion of emptiness and then it's all over. You never have to deal with this self again, right? You see what a burden it is, you're ready for it to go. And somehow that didn't happen yet, did it?

We get caught in philosophical thinking about it. And this one, if you start believing it, I want to say—endless. Endless.

This is why I love talking about and exploring sense of self. I like to talk about demystifying the sense of self, investigating the sense of self. Because everything the Buddha taught, as far as we can tell, isn't to introduce us to new philosophical concepts to discuss. That really wasn't his point in choosing what to share. Rather, it was to point us to accurate perception of our direct experience, to see what frees our hearts and minds from confusion and suffering. He's not pointing to anatta to drive us crazy—"See if you can get subtle enough to really see it." No. He's pointing to an obvious truth of how things are that, when we begin to recognize it, frees us from confusion.

The way I look at it, which is fun, and that's the angle of this talk, is hopefully from a very practical exploration of the moment-to-moment experience of sense of self arising, sense of self passing away. Not about thinking about it right so that we'll get the big bang. Also, I'd like to point out it's not always like that—one big explosion and you're completely free. It's often the way Suzuki Roshi talked about. You know how he talks about getting wet in a fog? He talks about how if you go walking out in a huge thunderstorm, you get really soaked and you know it—there's no secret.

So we're waiting for that, the big boom. But if you go walking out in a fog—and we get that here a lot, fog—and if you go really walking in it for a couple of hours, you don't quite notice when, but you get

soaked. Soaked to the skin, soaked to the bone. But it's a gradual process.

And I know in my experience, for myself and for many, many people, that's how insight, that's how our understanding develops. Little blips moment by moment, accurate perception moment by moment, and we don't even recognize a lot of the time that that's what's happening. Because we're looking for the big thing, and also a lot of these moment-to-moment insights are not so pleasant. And so, you know, that's kind of, "Oh God, what a drag, this is coming up again." Anyway, so that's really how it works.

So I want to talk about really demystifying anatta, exploring the sense of self. Just some ideas that come to my mind, some tips—not in any way covering everything. But first, to talk about what's really the nature of insight. What is understanding, really?

There's a famous quotation from Thich Nhat Hanh I use a lot: "Understanding does not arise as the result of thinking." Did you hear that? Did you believe it? "It is the result of the long process of conscious awareness. Sometimes understanding can be translated into thoughts, but often thoughts are too rigid and limited to carry much understanding." From Thich Nhat Hanh.

I know you all experience that. Sometimes you'll come into an interview and you'll really have, you know, a very real experience you want to talk about, and the words just don't really do it. They're too rigid and limited. So we can't think our way into insight.

But one way I like to describe it—the way I experience insight—is like a shift of perception. It's not that reality suddenly changed. But the perception, the way we see and understand it, suddenly shifts. You know what I mean? And this is not just dhamma insight, but just in our life. I think I talked at the very beginning—right view is really literal. Suddenly we recognize—we're using seeing as a kind of metaphor for all the senses—more accurately. We suddenly see a situation differently, or a problem. Suddenly you see what you could do about that problem, or your personality, from a whole new angle.

So, in a way, the recognition of a sense of self not being a real entity is very similar. It's like the optical illusion—when you see a picture, you know that very famous one that looks like a line drawing of a vase. And you see a vase, but if you look at it another way, it's two faces in profile. That's a very famous one. Or those magic eye things that are just geometric colors, and if you look for a long time in the right way, suddenly a 3D image springs out. They have whole books of those where people just sit and stare at them.

So you see, once you see the other way—both ways—it's not like the first way of perceiving went away, but we also perceive there's another way of recognizing the same set of circumstances. See what I mean? And both then, both ways of perceiving might be accessible. It didn't change reality, but it expanded. It really changed how we can perceive and understand in more than one way. And also we might see more accurately.

So when in those magic eye pictures, when suddenly you see like two hockey players—now this is a trick question. Are there really two hockey players in that flat sheet? Is there really a three-dimensional picture

in that flat sheet? No. It's a shift in perception. But you've seen the picture. If someone else came to you who never saw it and said, "Well, you're just a fool. There's no other thing in there. It's just these blue and yellow geometric patterns"—you don't have to get into a fist fight about it. You don't have to prove anything. But you know for yourself. That's really what we call verified faith.

You've seen it for yourself. You may not always be able to see in that way again, but you've known that there's another possibility. Just that simple shift in perception is like an example of what insight is like. Once we recognize that perception shifts, the perception leads to how we think about the world, how we view, how we respond, how we act. And I'll say more about that, though we've talked some about it already. So that's the basic of how insight works—this shift.

To come to the sense of self: there's one sutta, which I didn't write down where it is—I read it years ago—where the Buddha describes our mind and consciousness as being like a magic show. He gives the example, as I recall, of a magician who comes and sets up his stall on the crossroads. The magician has a stage and he's doing all the magic tricks. And you know how it is when you first see it—it's like, wow, that's amazing. Now, of course, we're all so cynical and sophisticated. We know there's no real magic and we assume it's a trick. I'm thinking back then the Buddha was imagining people would go, "Wow, that's amazing! How does he do it? Oh, it's magic."

But then he says, once you go behind and you see how the trick is done, all the sense of magic falls apart, doesn't it? We see, oh, that's how it's done. Very logical cause and effect. There's no mystery about it. So he says the same thing for how consciousness, how perception and thinking can construct our view of the world.

I'm going to use that image of the magic show in terms of how the mind constructs a view of ourselves as being a separate, steady, lasting entity. And even if we say in our mind, "Well, I know it's not," the way we respond, the way we react, is often from the sense or the assumption that there is. Or am I wrong about that? Does anyone have a sense that you sometimes react to things in the world as if it was all about you and you're the center of everything? Yeah, that's how we look.

This is from Ramana Maharshi. It's my favorite quotation from Ramana: "The idea of self is like a ghost caused by the play of shadows. If you look closely, the ghost vanishes. Because the ghost was never there, so also with a 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, there's nothing to be found. It's found not to exist."

What I think is really interesting—and I love doing this in my own life, not just in formal practice, but in ordinary life—is really noticing, bringing awareness to when the sense of self arises. Because certainly, I would say we experience a sense of self, experientially. I mean, it seems to be there pretty much all the time. That's our assumption. But the felt sense—physical or mental, emotional—that felt sense of "me," of self... is there anyone who never experiences that? You know what I mean? Just that very basic sense of me. This is something that we experience.

And I think sometimes the confusion comes when people are thinking, "Well, I shouldn't be experiencing this," or "I'm not experiencing this."

Or something that has to stop being experienced. You know, we get all crazy about it, instead of just noticing whenever a sense of self arises, and turning ours into another arising experience we can notice. We don't have to make it some big special thing. It's really a lot of fun to explore this because it does come up a lot.

When Ramana was saying to turn and look at it—I think what happens a lot in terms of perception is that when something is so familiar, like the sense of me, when it comes up it's almost not even recognized as something arising. It's just kind of like an assumed backdrop for everything that's going on. And we don't think to look at it. It's almost like our perception, our awareness just snaps shut and we assume it and keep on going and act from it, instead of stopping to see, whoa, what is this?

So how is it a magic show? A sense of self arising in a moment is really—back to my talk of last week—it's really concocted out of moment to moment aspects of our experience. And it's a concoction, a cocktail that's arising over and over and over all through the day with kind of different elements. But not looked at closely, it feels like it's always the same.

The way I want to talk about it tonight is that often—I don't want to say always, but often—the concocting begins with a moment of perception. We've talked about perception quite a bit. You know what we mean by perception in a moment? That sense of when there's a sense object, a sight, a sense door that works, an eye, and the two come together—sight, eye—and there's consciousness. That's called contact. This is happening every moment of our being alive, fast, so fast.

When contact comes together, one of the five aggregates, as someone mentioned—I think Andrea or Brian—one of the five aggregates is perception. This quality, it's a mental quality that recognizes the experience. So seeing, and perception is based on memory. It might be a person, or if it's someone you know, it might be the name, or it might be red, recognizing it as a color, recognizing it as a bowl. This is going on all the time.

Obviously—although it's not so obvious—it's pretty subjective, because the particular perception, the recognition, is of course influenced coming out of our particular life experience, isn't it? But first to say: perception arising every moment is certainly very useful. It's how our whole world is constructed and explained. Of course, half the time it's constructed and explained inaccurately, so that's the problem. But we need some perception, and when we're all in more or less agreement, it helps things to run.

Like you heard the bell gong out there fifteen minutes ago. You know bell, you know, oh, it's time to come into the hall. You know the perception is you're yogis and I'm the speaker—you're quiet and I talk. It's helpful. If we all didn't have any perception of who's doing what, it'd be chaos, and we hate chaos. So perception is really very useful.

But it's also interesting to see how quickly the whole world, our whole description of a world, forms around perception. Just to see how it works is also a very fun thing to play with here on retreat. Some people have been talking about it.

A simple example happened to me a couple weeks ago, but it just struck me because it was so clear. I was looking for a book for something about my talk a couple weeks ago, some quotation, and I don't have my books here. Andrea found the book for me down in the staff yurt. So I was looking through the book—it was a thick book—and I opened it to the page I wanted, and someone had already marked it there, a little note. I looked at the note and there was this immediate—it was my handwriting. Oh great, some things don't change. It's been two years since I was here. But there was this immediate sense of me. It's just a piece of paper with pencil scrawls on it, and me—this felt sense of me. It was really funny. Wow, here I am. And then my whole life—when was I last here? I guess I was using this, I do like this quotation, I guess I do use it a lot. But what was really funny was how just some pencil scrawls could evoke my whole sense of self, past and future. Very interesting. Not bad or good, just really kind of fun to watch that.

So, as I think Andrea was talking about, perceptions are of course influenced by whatever qualities are arising in the mind, as well as memory. When perceptions are influenced by delusion, as she's talking about, we recognize inaccurately—or by greed, or by hatred. Sometimes we just see with another person and we recognize differently from each other, and there's not necessarily a sense of right or wrong. But just to see how implicitly we assume our perceptions are accurate—yet just from different personal histories and different cultures and different ethnicities and different countries and different languages, we're going to recognize differently.

Even when there seems to be a lot that's similar. There's a simple example with a good friend. Actually, Sally, Guy's wife—I was at their house once, and there was a throw over the couch. I said something about, "Oh yeah, it's on that blue throw over there." And she said, "What are you talking about, the blue throw?" I said, "What do you mean? The blue throw on your couch. Big, big blue blanket on the couch." She said, "That's not blue, that's green."

And we really talked about it. I could not see green. She could not see blue. It's really interesting. Then you could get into a whole thing—who's right? Who's wrong? Like there's an absolute blue, and I'm right. You can get nuts about it. Okay, we didn't come to blows over the stupid blue-green afghan, but that quality of perceptions that don't match can lead to war. It leads to a lot of arguments.

Think of a close relative that you have a disagreement with about a particular situation. How much of that's based in differing perceptions of what went on? It's really powerful. And so when the perception is inaccurate, the whole world we create isn't reliable.

The Buddha said—this is his definition of *papañca*, of complication, of concocting—"Dependent on the eye and forms, eye consciousness arises. The meeting of the three is sense contact. With sense contact as condition, there is feeling tone, *vedanā*." So that's another aggregate, as well as perception. "What one

feels, one perceives"—so you feel it right away, then perception. Beautiful blue throw. Green, not so pretty. Blue, nice. "What one perceives, one thinks about. What one thinks about, one mentally proliferates"—one complicates with associations, memories, and so forth. "And with these proliferations as the source, the mind, the heart, is beset. It is assailed with mental perceptions and notions." Like the story someone told about the monk painting the tiger on the wall and then getting afraid.

So there's a perception, we make up all this stuff, we concoct all this stuff, and whether it's about me or something else, there's a sense of me at the heart of it, and then we really believe it—until we can have a more accurate perception.

A simple example, just to see how this happens. A few years ago when I was in Burma, I was at a meditation center. There was a little flagstone path leading to a Bodhi tree that's surrounded by a concrete wall, just a little thing, and people walk in a circle around it. I was walking up, and there was a Burmese nun walking around it with her hands in *añjali*. Right away I recognized—okay, that was my perception—walking around, hands in *añjali*. I thought, "Oh, isn't that lovely? There's such faith here."

I know a lot of the Burmese nuns have very deep faith, and a lot of their practice is *buddhānussati*, really recollecting the qualities of the Buddha, which is both a samādhi collecting practice and also really lights up the energy, the faith. So that was my historical information that led to that perception. "Oh, isn't that nice? Oh, so much faith." So that was the assailing. Then other memories come up, and the mind makes memories and associations. But it's just a tree, for God's sake. It's just a tree. It's not the Buddha. It's not even the same tree.

She's walking around, you know, so faithful to a tree. What the heck is that all about anyway? And I guess I'm not a devotional type. Blah, blah, blah. All of this in the space of about ten seconds as I'm walking up. When I get close enough to actually see her, she was walking around texting on her cell phone. Oh, okay—so much for all of that.

As soon as you see it, as soon as the perception is accurate, all that story is gone. Just gone. It vanishes into thin mist because it has no relationship to anything. I'm sure my mind went off into some other story after that, but I don't remember what it was. I just thought it was quite amusing.

But that's perception leading to our whole world—what we perceive, we think about. When the perception is inaccurate, we get way far away. When we recognize accurately, the whole magic show falls apart for that moment. You don't have to tear it apart. It's gone because it doesn't make any sense.

Nisargadatta Maharaj says, "The world appears so real to you because you think about it all the time. When you stop thinking, it will vanish into thin mist." And you think, "I don't want it to vanish into thin mist. As much trouble as it gives me, I'd rather have it than not." And as long as that's the case, you'll have it.

Talking more specifically about the perceptions that lead to this concocting of sense of self, I want to quote

Ajahn Buddhadasa, who had such a pithy way of putting things. There's a book of his writings that Santikaro Bhikkhu translated, very much exploring sense of self, called *Heartwood of the Bodhi Tree*. It's really very accessible, fun to read, not abstruse and scholarly at all, although he was a great scholar.

So he says—just for your reflection, not to believe, but to bring us into exploring—when you notice sense of self: "The sense of self is merely a condition that arises when there is grasping and clinging in the mind." That's it. All this huge trouble-making thing that we're at such pains to get rid of, that we suffer so much from—just a condition arising when the conditions come together, when there's grasping and clinging in the mind.

A friend of ours says, "I want, I need, therefore I am." And it's true, but look and see for yourself. This isn't about some kind of judging of wanting; it's about exploring and seeing. We can see it on really strong levels, like Andrea was talking about—how we can get really attached to a view of ourselves, or when she was describing being angry about something and really attached to that. It operates on strong levels, but it's also arising in relation to quite little experiences, hundreds of times every day. That's why we don't really notice it so much. That's why it feels so ongoing.

Merely a condition which arises when conditions are there for it and passes when they dissolve. Just with accurate perception, the whole thing is gone. You don't have to do anything about it. Wisdom does it. Clear seeing, wisdom—when the perception isn't distorted by *kilesa*, by greed, hatred, confusion.

So it's a condition. He really says it's a sense of self, not a thing but a verb, an activity. There are words in Pali—*ahaṃkāra* and *mamaṃkāra*—that are translated as something like "I-ing" and "my-ing." That's what's going on in relation to something. There's grasping and clinging in relation to some little perception or feeling tone or feeling in the body or thought. I-ing, my-ing—boom, birth of self.

Rather than thinking about this, it's really—I swear—it's fun to explore when you're somewhere like this on retreat, where you have the time and space and you're not too involved in complicated interactions. You can kind of see it coming in little ways. This isn't about getting demoralized—"Oh my God, every time I turn around, a sense of self! That's too much." No, it's great that it's too much, because that's how we get to see it. If it just came up once a day, you'd have to be so alert to catch it. But luckily, you'll have many opportunities every day. How fortunate we are to explore this in this way.

So I'll give this little story. I always use this same one because I like it—why make up a new one when I have this? It hasn't happened since then, ten years ago. It's the last time sense of self arose. Why are you laughing? Luckily I'm not a monk, because laying claim to false attainments is a *pārājika* offense—but I am not ordained.

Anyway, very simple. Just to give a sense of how we can explore this.

I was on a long retreat like this at IMS in Barre quite some years ago. And I know it was quite some years ago because the setup is similar to here—you go into the dining room and eat, all hundred people

crammed in there, the same kind of deal. It was a long time ago because at that time we didn't have so much uniformity of dishes and mugs. Now everything's the same, but then it was all the mugs that had collected over twenty years of IMS that people had left there. So you'd walk in to eat or have tea and there were just shelves of mugs, all completely different.

I was deep in the retreat, and for weeks I would just go and take whichever mug, have my tea, and it was simple and easy. Whatever was going on was just going on.

But one day, I went and took a mug as usual, and as I was sitting there drinking my tea, what I realized now is that it just felt very pleasant. The color was pleasant. The way it felt—you know how some mugs just feel good in your hand—was pleasant. And the thought arose: "This is really... this might be the perfect mug. It's just so nice. I like it. I wonder if I should take it back to my room and keep it."

In that moment, that was birth of self. I-ing and my-ing. Me and my mug. Right in that moment—boom—*ja ti*, birth of self, right then. The grasping to the pleasantness, the grasping to the idea of the mug. In terms of the dependent origination, which I think Guy will talk about a bit tomorrow, another way the Buddha describes the concocting—the middle part really being, you know, there's contact, there's feeling tone, the pleasant arises. When there's not clear seeing with pleasant, the mind naturally moves into leaning into it and then grasping. Or if it's unpleasant, leaning away and grasping at something different. So that's the grasping and the clinging—ah, me and my mug. And the next is becoming, turning into birth, birth of self.

It's all really fast. But from that first sense of the mind grasping, sense of "me" is a condition that arises when there's grasping and clinging in the mind. So instead of just the mug—that very quick movement of grasping—it's seeing the perception, the pleasant feeling, and then all the birth of self, and then all the attendant thoughts that come with it, all the concocting.

I saw that. And you can feel—this is where you can really notice when that grasping comes in—it's almost like a physical or mental contraction, however it is for you. The world contracts around. I can just feel it. It's like, "Ah, me and my mug." As long as we're focused on the thing we want, we don't notice that. But really, when the Buddha talks about grasping as a maker of measurement, instead of just the awareness, the field of awareness where things are coming and going, it all narrows down to me and my mug.

So in that moment, I saw it. Put it down. Never mind, I'm not going to save it. And that was the death of that self. That's where the dependent origination goes—from birth to suffering and death. In that moment, that was the death of that self. It was over.

As Ajahn Chah describes the dependent origination with its twelve links, as I just described the middle ones, he says it happens so fast. It's not like you have moments to explore. "Wait, there's the clinging. There's the grasping. Wait a minute, I know birth is about to come. I can feel 'me' coming." He said it's like if you fall from a tree—it's really fast and you hit twelve branches on the way down, but boom, you just land in dukkha. You don't really have time to stop and reflect on each branch. There it is. Birth of self,

death of self.

He's so funny.

Okay, so that was it for then. But the next day, I came into the dining room, and I looked for that mug.

I pretended to myself I wasn't looking, but you know—I'm not really looking, but let's just look instead of taking the first available mug. Oh, there it is.

So right then, noticing the constriction of wanting, the taking it, the sitting down—this really is a good mug. And so I started thinking maybe I should take it to my room. I started plotting the complications.

I thought, well, my room is all the way at the other end of the building. I'm walking really slow. That means every meal I have to schlep for half an hour walking down to get it, schlep for half an hour back, so I have to start an hour early to get my mug to drink my tea. Okay, maybe not. Put it down. Put it down.

And then it really died. It didn't get born again. But to really see—that's the complications that come from the birth of self, from grasping at something so simple.

So you see, it's fun to watch, right? You don't get all upset about it. Don't take it personally. Every single person on this earth—except maybe our Hans—the mind is concocting like this all the time. And then we beat ourselves up because our mind is doing it. If we had a choice, would you do this? No. It's just what the habits of mind are doing. So we bring in our moment-to-moment mindfulness and explore it.

And seeing the difference between what's effortless—you know, the times of awareness when you're just noticing what's happening. There's interest. It may be clear. It may be vague. That doesn't matter. It may be subtle. It may be gross. That doesn't matter. But there's just a sense of effortless being with what's happening, however it is, until some grasping at some experience comes up and there's a sense of self which just kind of freezes everything. Several people have said that it's so exhausting—the thoughts, the emotions, the moods, what to do.

Here you may not notice immediately what's grasped, whether it's a perception or a feeling or a physical sensation or a mood. But we can at least start to notice when there's that glitch, when there's that sense of narrowing, constricting, when everything's gotten complicated. Not so much thinking your way in, but just—ah—reconnect with the where. Ah, okay. All tight and complicated feels like this. And you bring in awareness and start exploring it again. See what's really going on.

This is where we can really start to notice the power of simple moment-to-moment unbiased awareness, which we've been talking about the whole time. If we're looking for something, that looking for is already narrowing the field of possibilities, putting on blinders. But when we're just moment to moment, whatever's arising, this willingness to just meet with unbiased awareness—that's what allows for a shift in perception, for recognizing something in a way that we didn't before, for maybe seeing how sense of self is constructed, noticing how it vanishes, how the whole magic show can fall apart.

Okay, just quickly. Someone who's inspiring for me in the sense of giving me the felt sense of this kind of freshness of moment-to-moment unbiased awareness—just the newness, the willingness to be present without an overlay of concept or idea. You know, like I think James showed a picture of a baby, right? Just that newness, that freshness, that willingness or interest to learn.

And it's so tricky because of our perceptions feeling so true and being so subtle, like the blue-green thing. I mean, who knew until you meet it? And how willing are we to just not hold on to the perception and go, oh, maybe it is green—and even trying, you can't see it.

Anyway, someone who inspires me in that way, who just gives me that feeling, is the cellist Yo-Yo Ma. I haven't ever seen him or heard him play in person, but I've seen various videos and movies about him over the years. And I know in the last few years he's been quite involved in a project called the Silk Road, which brings together musicians from all over the world, mostly from along the Silk Road in the Middle East and Asia into China. They get together and compose and play with all the different instruments and all the different kinds of music.

And it's vastly different, you know—he's a trained classical cellist in the Western classical music tradition, and he might be playing with musicians from China or Kazakhstan, from Iran, with different scales and different ways of using tone and music. And they get together and compose together and play together. It's really far out—this whole sense of incredible openness and curiosity. Not just "I play mine and you play yours and we try to appreciate each other," but actually doing it together.

I have to say, when I listen with my untrained ears—ears whose perception is really based on what I've grown up familiar with and liking—I can't get there. I try. I have a couple of the albums and I'll really listen because I love the idea, and my mind is like... it's far out, but I can't really relax into it. Let me put on my Chopin nocturnes again. And I can see, okay, that's not good or bad—that's just my perception. But his openness is so far out, and I take that as a quality of the freshness of moment-to-moment mindfulness awareness that's possible.

The other video I saw of him was actually in Germany years ago on TV, where he was flying in by helicopter to a small tribe in Africa. They showed him getting out of the helicopter—it was in German, and I really couldn't understand much of what was said, but I didn't really need it. He gets out of the helicopter, and it was prearranged—he was meeting the really old man who was the chief musician of this tribe of bush people. They're getting together, and he has his second-best cello, like a million-dollar cello, that he pulls out of the helicopter. And this man has his instrument, which is literally like a round metal oil can with the top and bottom gone, a long wooden pole, and two strings on it. So he was playing that and singing, and then Yo-Yo Ma would play his cello—they're playing for each other. And then Yo-Yo Ma says, "Oh, let's trade." So they trade instruments, and he's trying to play this thing, going, "I can't play it nearly as well as you." Just such a freshness. It's so far out to have that openness to discover.

And so that's really what we're cultivating here with our moment-to-moment mindfulness. Just notice

those moments of, "Wow, look at that—completely identified with this thought. Isn't that amazing?" That's the quality of awareness. "Oh, I thought this is what's happening. It's not what's happening at all." I was sure that person who's driving me bonkers is the one walking across in front of me, over my walking path, and all those thoughts. Finally you look up, even though you're trying not to—it's not that person at all. Cool. Isn't that amazing how that works? And the whole magic show falls apart.

So that's why there's this freshness—this mind of mindfulness allows wisdom to come in when it's not distorted by *kilesa*. And moment by moment by moment, our willingness to just remember mindfulness is what's strengthening the condition for the next moment.

In terms of other aspects of experience that we grasp and create the whole concoction of self from—obviously this is a huge topic; I'm just going to name a few so you can notice in yourself. Perception, as I mentioned, is so easy to grasp and have a sense of self about—like seeing my handwriting, "Oh, my handwriting," the whole world in a second. Fun to watch that.

The sense of body—now this is a huge one. I'm talking about not so much the idea of body; that's an idea. Notice the difference between idea and what's the actuality of the moment's experience. This is what gets really interesting in terms of mindfulness and perception. We all have ideas about our body, a sense of identification, of grasping to body as self. But explore here: when you feel that, when this is me comes up about the body, don't just end there.

Let your awareness tune into what's the experience in this moment that's being perceived as body and being held to. Because when you start to see that, the magic show breaks down at a moment-to-moment level.

I'll just give a couple of examples. You look for yourself—don't agree with me, and she's full of it, okay? Just look and see what's true for you.

So if I'm sitting with my eyes closed in meditation and my knee's killing me—we all know the difference, I'm sure, between the concept "my knee is killing me" and the sensations of burning. We've talked about that. It's not easy, but it's not rocket science. But often seeing how that sense of identification works with the eyes closed, my knee—what's the actual experience that's being perceived as "my knee" in that moment? And then whether it's pleasant or unpleasant.

So often there really is just sensations of vibrating, for example. I'm calling it my knee. When I think "my knee," there's a mental image that comes in my mind—and it's totally different for any of you. There's a sense of my body, or a mental image of my knee that I don't notice as seeing. And the sense of that mental image, which is just a visual thought, and the particular sensation of vibrating, and a concept of space—like locating the sensation down here, and the mental image is here—and it's all, "that's my knee." And not even questioned, you know? That's my body, that's my knee, and it's causing a ruckus, and then we go off into the concoction of "me."

Just explore. Not to make it go away.

I remember many years ago I was doing a vipassanā practice, Goenkaji style, where you sweep your attention through your body. At one point—I wasn't sitting with Goenkaji then, I was with a different teacher you could actually talk to about stuff—this was a long time ago. I was sweeping through my body, but there would be this overlay of image, an overlay of the image which wasn't the sensations, and it was driving me crazy. Because there's the thought: that's an image, it's in the way of the sensation, I can't feel the knee because there's the image of the knee. You know how that is—you get this idea that this is wrong and it drives you crazy? Did that ever happen to any of you here in your practice?

And I went to the teacher, and thank God, he goes, "Yeah, okay, the image is the image, the sensation is the sensation—what's the problem? You just notice what's happening." Sound familiar? It's like, oh, right, image, sensation, fine. We don't have to put it together into some big show. Just look and see.

You look in the mirror and there's this whole idea of me, my body—it's horrible, it's beautiful. It's just a seeing. It's just an image, that image in the mirror. It's just a sight, you know? Is it me? And then we start thinking about it and construct it all. But just with moment-to-moment awareness—not to get all woo-woo and falling apart, but just being in the moment—what's the perception? What's being held to in the moment? How is the mind concocting a whole story, a sense of me?

And notice: you turn away from the mirror, and say you've had all these horrible thoughts about how you've aged ten years in the last three weeks and you're never going to do another retreat, you look like hell. And you turn away from the mirror—that whole concoction falls away. You think, oh, it's time for lunch—it's all gone. Notice that. Just notice that. It's really interesting.

Another big one—big one—vedanā, this pleasant, unpleasant, neutral feeling tone. It's a mental experience of how the mind feels an experience. And often it's the vedanā, the pleasant feeling of something, the unpleasant feeling of something that the mind is clinging to, and often that's not quite noticed. An example: say you've been having a series of good sittings.

Really pleasant, really calm, really peaceful or light, whatever it is. And you know it's pleasant and you like it, but after a while you're really being mindful, you're aware of liking it. "I know it's going to go away," you're telling yourself, and you really believe it. "I know this is conditioned, I know it's going to go away. I'm not clinging." Right? "I'm not clinging." We really think we're not clinging. We know it's going to go. It goes away, and by gum, somehow we're really bummed out.

So there was clinging, but you really don't think you were clinging to the experience. Often it's that pleasant feeling quality arising moment to moment with perception that the clinging is to, and we don't quite recognize that.

Or clinging to the unpleasant. Yes, why would we cling to the unpleasant? Because we're nuts. But we keep, like I said the other day, we keep focusing on the repugnant aspect of something, and that marries

us to the thing just as much as holding on to the pleasant.

So all we're saying is just bring that fresh awareness and notice it—not get rid of it, just notice. What's the magic show? How's it concocting us? I mentioned the other night, Buddhadasa often talks about how much pleasant feeling we base our life on. He's saying more just notice the wave-like nature: pleasant, unpleasant, pleasant, unpleasant, neutral, arising and passing every moment. When we start to just notice that, well, I guess it's crazy to base our life around wanting pleasant. But we know it's crazy. It happens anyway. There's no point in saying that. But just noticing this.

The third level—and this, again, yes, I'm going through the Satipaṭṭhāna, the four foundations of mindfulness—is mindfulness of mind: emotions, moods, states of mind. And of course this is a huge area where we perceive and there's a sense of grasping to a particular mood, a particular description, a series of thoughts about ourself. This is really a big area.

And what's interesting, the Buddha says in terms of experiencing the sensations of body and bringing awareness to the movements of mind, the mind is changing so much more rapidly than the body. It's so much more obviously impermanent that if you're going to—he didn't exactly say it this way—if you're going to identify with something, it makes more sense to identify with the body.

But really, maybe—this is me, not the Buddha—because the mind's changing so rapidly, to me that's really a much stronger place where I don't notice that subtle grasping to a particular perception, a particular mood. And we really—that's me, right? This happens so much more quickly.

I mean, I'm sure you've noticed how when a mood comes, even though you can say to yourself, "This wasn't here yesterday, probably won't be here tomorrow"—but it's a difficult mood—isn't part of it telling you, "But this is really how it is. And this is really who I am, deep in the depths. Even though I didn't know it before, I wasn't aware of it yesterday, but it was there, waiting to come out. It was really there. I just was ignoring it in my delusion."

But really just noticing how and what is being clung to, and how that concocts a sense of self.

From Ajahn Sumedho: "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."

Right? And you see how that can happen from any sense experience? This is also a really fun thing to explore, sort of in the way of the stories that Andrea was talking about the other night. From anything. The most innocuous sense experience. You see a deer. "Oh, yes, see. Ah, the cute deer." And Bambi, and the fifth grade, and Old Yeller, and it's endless. Pretty soon I go to Old Yeller and I'm in trauma. Really, I mean, that really did a job on me when I was five years old. And if you're too young to have seen the movie, it's just as well. It's about a dog.

Or something beautiful comes and you're, "Oh, beauty in my life," and then something difficult comes, "Oh, the horrible things in my life," and it's just flipping back and forth every two minutes. But without noticing that each is a new concoction, birth and death of self. We don't really get that. We think it's a steady state.

Ajahn Sumedho then: "But if I recognize that I'm taking off—it's my taking off into orbit—if I recognize that, then my refuge is no longer in being that person."

I'm not taking refuge in being a personality or my views and opinions. So then the world of Ajahn Sumedho ends. Just noticing that.

This whole huge world of Carol can come up around seeing a deer, and then you turn around, the whole thing drops away and it's gone. Notice that. Notice the gone-ness. Notice the seething power of these emotions and stories and thoughts, but the absolute emptiness of them when we don't keep buying into the grasping, when we just notice how the magic show's working.

This is from Dilgo Khyentse, and I'll read it: "I, the sense of I, is just a thought. Thoughts and feelings have no intrinsic solidity, form, shape, or color. When a thought of anger arises in the mind with such force that you feel aggressive and destructive, is that anger in the mind actually holding a weapon? Is it at the head of an army? Can it really burn things or carry them away like a violent river? No, that actual anger, like any other thought or feeling, has no lasting self-existence. It's just like wind roaring in empty space."

I love that. With any strong emotion—beautiful ones too—we don't have to damp it down. It's just like wind roaring in empty space. We don't need to grasp it, we don't need to fear it, we don't need to do anything about it. Just let the wind roar in the empty space and it blows itself out. No problem. When there's not that grasping sense of self—when there is, just let it roar and notice when it falls away again.

So we're just tuning in when there's this contraction of grasping. And of course, I can't go into even more subtle experience like motivation, volition. We always talk about that—who's the one deciding to move? Just a mental factor arising. Or the sense of knowing, of consciousness itself. Because it's arising every moment and it's so subtle, again, it can feel like me. There can just be this subtle grasping, tightening, contracting around it.

So just noticing whenever you feel that little or gross—incredibly gross or subtle—sense of the contraction of grasping and experience that sense of self. Notice the birth of self. Get interested in how the magic show's concocted. Notice when it falls away. As Ajahn Buddhadasa says, birth and death of self happens hundreds of times in a day. So just as we notice the birth, notice the death, and notice the times in between.

He says—this is Buddhadasa again—it's truly normal and natural that the nature of the mind is just to be aware. The times when there's no birth of self after death of self is just awake, calm. Spacious is a metaphor that's often used—spacious as opposed to the narrowness of fixation, of clinging. But space can

be an idea that we also cling to.

He says, in any moment when the heart is not clinging or grasping at something and creating a sense of self—in any moment when that's not present—this is Buddhadasa's language—we truly realize emptiness. Because just the emptiness of sense of self, it's truly normal and natural. It's not like some huge endpoint that we've got to get to. It's just the way things are.

Understanding or recognizing anattā isn't like something that's here driving the bus goes away. We just recognize differently. It's not like everything falls apart because now we're not holding it all together. I mean, we're not doing such a great job trying to hold it together, let's face it. It's that, in fact, the burden of trying to hold it together falls away. And it's just truly normal and natural to notice the time between births.

That's why, as we were seeing, periods of calm can be interesting. But you see how uncomfortable calm is. The mind is what Buddhadasa calls "volunteering for suffering." It's calm, nothing's going on. All of a sudden—oh, let's get something going on. Let me think about this horrible thing that might happen in ten years. I'd rather be a suffering self than just this calmness in between taking birth and death of self.

Just notice it.

And the last thing I want to point out is that while reality does not change—the sense of emptiness of self, this natural state of things—this is not the emptiness of disconnection or the calmness of just not caring, of nothing matters. That's not clear perception. That's not the liberating truth the Buddha is pointing us to. It's not passive, unfeeling, or uncaring.

It's really the doorway that opens when our mind and heart isn't all caught up in this obsessive self-referencing. That's when metta and compassion and wisdom naturally become our responses.

The Tibetans said, once you realize emptiness, it would be absurd to do anything negative. It just doesn't make sense. When you realize emptiness, compassion arises with it simultaneously. Just in a moment, in a moment.

Two other quick quotations. From Dogen Zenji: "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 remove the barriers"—I would say the seeming barriers—"between oneself and others."

And the last, from Mary Oliver: "Love yourself, then forget it, then love the world."

So let's just sit quietly for a moment.

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