To Study the Self

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 59:38

When Andrea spoke last time, she talked about delusion in a very helpful way, and the three distortions of perception—the third one being the distortion of perceiving a sense of intrinsic self-existence where there is none. So I thought I'd go off and talk a little bit more about that.

Really, I've been thinking about this. When I was on retreat a couple months ago, a very well-known line from Dogen Zenji kept running through my head. One simple translation goes:

To study the Buddhist way is to study the self.
To study the self is to forget the self.
To forget the self is to be enlightened by the 10,000 things.

It's nice, isn't it? What the hell does that mean? But it's nice. That's the framework of what I'm talking about. Whether that translates to you, I have no clue.

I want to begin with something I love talking about: just exploring what we see through steady awareness—not going looking for it, but recognizing again and again how this distortion of perception arises and gets us all confused, this particular one about sense of self. And of course, it's resting on what Andrea spoke about. When there's any delusion, there's going to be greed or hatred or delusion. With greed or hatred, there's always delusion. There can be delusion without those two. But when any of these are present in the mind stream, in the consciousness, in the awareness, and not recognized, it's impossible for the perception, for the awareness to recognize accurately what's occurring, what's happening. The Buddha says that over and over.

This really is, in some ways, the most poignant aspect of tanha. The Buddha talked about tanha, or thirst—whether it's wanting or pushing away, fed by delusion—as the second noble truth, the cause of our suffering. There's the obvious suffering of just the wanting and not getting, but really the deeper point is that it's obstructing the clear recognition. As I spoke about the other night, that clear recognition is simply what allows wisdom to arise and the mind and heart to just put down the burden of wanting and aversion and getting so lost in this me, me, me. It's really poignant. But without recognizing that that's what's occurring, as Andrea said, the perception is distorted. There's a quotation from Anaïs Nin, the French writer, that we see the world not as it is, but as we are. It's really like that. We just don't recognize what's going on.

In terms of how that works with the sense of self, the personality view—to me, this personality view, sakkaya-ditthi, is of the three vipalasas the one that's the most deeply entrenched, the one that really is

kind of beneath all the other sufferings. And it's just so frequent, so familiar. It feels like home, doesn't it? We don't always like our home, but it feels like home. So we keep going back there, keep recreating and believing it moment after moment.

But it's not that there's something real, this sense of self. You all know this, but I have to say it anyway. It's not that the sense of self, the ego, is some real existing thing that when you finally hit accurate recognition and uproot every strand of clinging in your mind, then you'll finally get rid of this nasty sense of self. It's just another conditioned phenomenon, arising experience like anything else. As many people say, it's a concoction that arises due to conditions, due to perception, due to contact, due to feeling, due to the thoughts that come from it. There's distorted perception, then distorted thinking, and then view—sakkaya-ditthi, the personality view.

The Buddha gave it such importance that of the three fetters that are seen through in the early Buddhist way of talking about the four stages of awakening, one of them is sakkaya-ditthi—seen through, understood not to have self-existing intrinsic existence. It doesn't mean the sense of self stops arising. It just means sooner or later the awareness understands it again, then it arises again, then it understands it again.

I want to bring in some other voices, not just mine. Ramana Maharshi says, "The ego is like a ghost caused by the play of shadows. If you look closely, the ghost vanishes. The ghost was never there. So also with ego, with sense of separate self. So long as one does not look closely at it, it continues to give trouble. But when one searches for it, it's found not to exist."

That's how it is. How do we investigate the nature of mind and the root of samsaric delusion? The very root of delusion is the thought of "I," the habit of clinging to the notion of self. And this notion is simply due to a failure to investigate. There's no such thing as a truly existing autonomous self. We fabricate this concept in the same way we make up all of our other thoughts. Then after constructing this self over and over again, we get so used to our invention that it seems to really exist as a distinct entity. And once this thought has deeply taken root, we demand that the self should be happy and comfortable, enjoying wealth and pleasures.

If it could be the center of the universe, that would be the best. This attitude is the very basis for our wandering around and around in samsara.

But it's not just because we're stupid and stubborn. The habits, the way that the kilesas do their job, the frequency of how fast the mind works—all of this feeds into this arising over and over again. This is really the biggest suffering: this concocting of the sense of me, the sense of I. But that's really what's happening. It's just arising in any particular moment due to particular conditions. It arises, it exists, it passes away.

If you remember reading—probably years ago—*Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, it's one of those early books that we all read. It has so many wonderful one-liners in it. The one that hit me, I think I was on retreat

when I was a nun in Thailand, and just happened to have one book. This is the book I happened to have. I don't know how I had it; it was a long time ago. Different lines from that book are burned into my memory in a really uplifting way.

This one line, Suzuki Roshi says: "Every existence is a flashing into the vast phenomenal world."

I love that. It's like each moment of existing is just a flashing into the world. It flashes and dissipates, flashes and dissipates. That was just so real for me at that moment. And when you have an insight like that, it just stays real. That's what the sense of self is, just like any other moment of existence—it's just a flashing. Conditions come together, it flashes into the universe, and it dissipates when the conditions change.

And it seems so real and solid only because it's not investigated. In the terms of how we're practicing here, with really steady awareness, there's no way not to recognize this is happening—not every moment, but frequently. That's the power of the subcontinuity of awareness. We see the conditions coming together, doing their little job, and falling apart.

Ajahn Sumedho says we create the world through our perceptions, our views, through the mental formations that come, and then it falls apart when we recognize with awareness:

"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."

Can you relate to that? Although it wouldn't be your world that arose around you, right? It takes off into orbit.

"My views, my feelings, my opinions—I can get caught in that world, that view of me that arises in consciousness."

You recognize right there the shift of attitude: from "this is me" to simply a view arising in consciousness, simply another thought arising in awareness.

"If I know that, if I recognize that, then the refuge is no longer in being a person. I'm not taking refuge in my personality or my views and opinions. Then it lets go, and the world of Ajahn Sumedho ends in that moment."

I think that's another important habit to notice: we tend to take refuge in our views and opinions—as Andrea talked about—not even recognizing they're views. Even more, we take refuge in being a personality. We may really dislike our personality, wish we had a different one, but that's still taking refuge in the personality.

So as Ajahn Sumedho says, the world of Ajahn Sumedho arises simply—it can arise around any sense contact, all day long. Just the slightest sense contact and the whole world of me can arise, just as he describes it.

Like the rain this morning. Wake up hearing gentle rain, and immediately: "It's really pleasant lying in bed listening to the rain"—which could just be a perception. But then the mind goes: "So pleasant, and it's really nice to be able to lie in bed, and it's lucky it's not a big rain. It's just a little rain, not like the hurricanes they have in the South. It reminds me of times as a child when I went camping with the Girl Scouts and the rain on the tent—not the time it washed us out, but the time it was a nice rain on the tent. But oh no, now I have to get up. And do I walk up there?"

Do I take my car up there? Is it going to rain later? And just like that, right? That's a matter of two seconds—less time than it took me to say it.

That's not a particularly dramatic example. I mean, we wouldn't necessarily notice that without steady awareness, would we? Because it's not a big flashing of obvious suffering or intense joy. It's just a simple little moment. How many little moments like that are in our day, around any sense—including mental ones, including a thought or a memory—the whole sense of "me" arising? With steady mindfulness, with steady awareness, this presents itself, this reveals itself.

We can't really hide the fact that these arisings of self come and go—if we're steady enough, if awareness is steady enough. And if you're really looking, it's a different self, isn't it? Each time different feelings, different emotions, different thoughts. Unexplored, unexamined—or when we pay a little bit of attention to it, then we don't pay attention when it goes away. Then there's awareness when it comes back, but there's not awareness when it goes away. That's how the wisdom mind doesn't arise, doesn't see the impermanence, doesn't see, as Ajahn Sumedho says, how the sense of "Ajahn Sumedho" fades away.

So I've told you that little story about the rain. I don't remember noticing when that particular little sense of Carol went away. Because without awareness, you're sort of half aware, right? I was doing things, so it shifts—then you're taking the shower, you're doing this, you're doing that. And without the steady awareness, it doesn't have to be really intense focus, but without it, the habit of just assuming "this is a steady me" is running in the background. So it felt like the steady Carol doing all the different things she did. And how many different ones today? Innumerable.

This doesn't have to only be noticed on retreat, but it's certainly a lot more supportive—more opportunity to see this—just because there's more space and less doing. I certainly notice when I'm doing and having to do the next thing, and that habit of the mind reaching forward, that it's just a little easier to overlook this subtlety. But we don't have to overlook it. It's really, really obvious when we do look.

So we notice the arising, but we also notice the dissolution. As Ajahn Buddhadasa talks about, the birth and death of self happens hundreds and hundreds of times in a day. And we can notice that. And then there are many other moments in the day when the mind, heart, consciousness is empty of grasping. These are his words—empty or void of grasping, of sakkāya-diṭṭhi, of the sense of self. There are many such moments, just as we talked about in another context—moments that are just cool or plain or neutral, nothing special. Steady, steady awareness also notices those.

Buddhadasa's language is not exactly what we're doing here, but he talks about the importance of noticing the birth and death of self. And equally important—of course it's all equal, right? We notice everything—equally important to notice the moments of just simplicity, of coolness. He calls it voidness, and that's how it's translated in his book: to generate a contentment with these moments of voidness, of emptiness of self.

That's really interesting—really being equally present and interested with the neutral. It's come up in a couple of the groups; I think I mentioned it in a talk, but a few people have mentioned it from their own experience. Seeing how, maybe they had to track it back—I'm just going to say it in the order it would have happened—seeing how when the experience of the mind is present, but it's a little bit neutral or calm or nothing special, seeing how the mind kind of whips something up. It brings up not even just a pleasant fantasy but an unpleasant fantasy, because it's a little juicier. It's like, because it's me, really, that sense of me. And somehow we really, I think I said in a group, get addicted to that little sense of oomph about me. We don't want it to go away.

That's just a habit. I'm not saying we don't want it, but it's familiar. It gives us a sense of me. Where would I be without the sense of me? This is from Ajahn Sumedho.

So when there's not those moments of voidness generating contentment, when there's not a sense of self arising, you could call that recognizing non-grasping. Because essentially, the sense of self arises when there's a moment of clinging or grasping to that particular sense experience, or the pleasant feeling, or the thought. You can feel that—I can feel that contraction, that sense of limitation, that sense of clinging come in right around any experience. So the rain: a very simple, pleasant thing. It didn't have to go anywhere.

As soon as the thought arises—"Oh, I like this"—and suddenly I'm thinking about Girl Scouts, it's not a huge contraction, but it's limiting. It's smaller.

The Buddha said in one of his suttas—he's talking about the measureless quality, the measureless mind and heart—and he says the *kilesas*, greed, hatred, and delusion, are makers of measurement, makers of limitation. You can feel that. You can feel it as soon as there's that contraction, like a contraction of self. But somehow it's just so familiar, it's a habit.

Ajahn Sumedho writes: "As one begins to realize or recognize non-grasping as the way, then emotionally one can at times feel quite frightened by it." I want to say it's not necessary to feel frightened by it. It's not like that has to happen. It can be a huge relief. It doesn't have to be frightening. But it can happen. "It can seem like a kind of annihilation is taking place. All that I think I am in the world, all that I regard as stable and real, starts falling apart. But if we have the faith to continue bearing with these emotional reactions and allow things that arise to cease, to appear and disappear according to their nature, then we find stability—not in achievement or attaining, but in being. Being awake, being aware."

I love that. It's really the sense of finding our stability in the inherent calmness of awareness, not in any

particular experience.

So, this "maker of measurement"—there's one way that Sogyal Rinpoche talked about it that really conveys how the clinging sense of self, this distorted perception-thought-view, is a kind of measurement. He talked about how in Tibet, when they're measuring to make the footprint of the foundation of a house they're going to build, they start in what would be the middle, and they have a piece of rope that's the diameter. Then they measure from there all the way around to determine how wide it's going to be. He says that's what we do with the sense of self, with the sense of "me here." Every momentary perception is measured back to the sense of me. Me perceiving this. Me wanting. Me not wanting. Just the simple sense of me that immediately makes the measurement of "other."

Seeing how that's the habit—we kind of laughed about it in some of the groups, how immediately the simplest little thing, like where do I sit when we sit down, can come back to "what does it say about me?" And it's all about me. It's really quite fun to watch if you're not taking it personally. And it isn't personal. We're really seeing how the habits of mind work.

So there are many, many moments in the day with arising and passing where we can really recognize the not-self, but also recognize that when there is a sense of self, that's also equally empty of self. It's not like that's a real thing, as I said in the beginning, that we have to see through. It's simply another conditioned phenomenon arising due to a sense of clinging at a particular experience and then the interpretation of that as being "me" or being "mine." And then that interpretation, that thought, becomes a view, a belief. As Andrea said, we don't recognize it. We don't get a neon sign: "View is arising! I think I'm a self!" It just feels true. That's how it is. We don't question it. But we can really see it arising due to lawful conditions and causes. It dissolves when those causes change, and it's also just nature.

In a way, I kind of love watching when the sense of self comes and when it goes. Seeing it takes the sting out of it, but also reveals just how much it comes, how strong it can be when unseen. And seeing it, it's just—again, it's just perception and *vedanā*, feeling tone and thoughts concocting this whole story. Ten million stories in a day. When you look at it, it's no wonder we're so tired so much of the time. Because we have this story, and then we react to it. And then we think, "How are other people thinking about me?"

And everybody that walks by, what are they thinking about me? And everyone else is thinking that. My god, the energy that's going around in here.

You wonder sometimes—one time at the retreat center, because there's so many more people, there's more energy bopping around. I remember one three-month retreat, about November, so it was two months in. You do your own thing when you're yogis. You may not have a sense of how it is on the staff and teacher side. There's a lot of energy roaming around. And as you know, sometimes it's a little bit identified with kilesas. That does happen sometimes.

I remember one time years ago, I was out somewhere, and I wasn't really paying much attention. I came

bopping in the front door, opened it, and the energy was so strong—I opened it and went, "Whoa!" I felt like it almost knocked me down the steps. I thought, "Oh, I better bring my awareness in here, walk it into here." So something goes on.

I wanted to read this: The fact that even the sense of self is an equally valid object of awareness. All objects of awareness met with awareness are equally valid objects for wisdom. They all exhibit the Dharma. They all show the same aspects of impermanence, of not-self, of unreliability, of nothing to rely on. They all show the same kind of emptiness of intrinsic existence and the same opening into the purity of awareness.

This is Dilgo Khyentse again: "This troublesome ego, which is so concerned about itself, has in reality never begun to exist. It does not exist anywhere now, and so it cannot cease to exist. Not the slightest trace of it can be found. When one recognizes this empty nature, therefore, any notion of there being an ego to dissolve vanishes. And at the same time, the energy to bring about the good of others dawns, uncontrived and effortless. Here you will see the unity of emptiness and compassion."

I just love this kind of absolute way of describing things. But that's how it is. When the awareness, the wisdom mind—sati-pañña, mindfulness-wisdom mind—really sees that there never was and there isn't now, all that clinging in that moment dissolves. And it doesn't just leave us like a blah nothing.

Really, when we see in how we're practicing here, when the awareness is steady and wisdom arises and the kilesas aren't being fed, many of you see how—not as an act of will—the kilesa, the wanting, the aversion, the confusion vanishes. When there's just this momentum of awareness and wisdom recognizing, it may slowly dissolve the kilesa, or it may just vanish. And it's really not a sense that you did it.

But that doesn't just leave an empty nothing. What's really important in the big picture—and by big picture I mean of our whole lives—is the steady cultivation, the steadiness of awareness and wisdom. What naturally occurs is also lawful, the Dharma: the wholesome arises when the kilesas aren't making so much noise. The wholesome arises, and wisdom-mindfulness feeds the wholesome. This is lawful.

So that's really what Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche was saying. In that moment of wisdom really recognizing the absolute emptiness—that there never was, there isn't an ego now—in that moment, the energy that's released from the clinging, from the holding, from the concocting and holding to it, naturally goes into compassion, mettā, equanimity. I don't mean that as a hook to make it worth exploring, but it does happen.

So I was thinking again—it kept coming up in my mind when I was on retreat, which is really why I was thinking about this: "To study the Dharma is to study the self, to study the self is to forget the self, to forget the self is to be enlightened by ten thousand things."

I was noticing in my own practice, but also from talking to so many people, that in a period of intensive practice—say a retreat like a month like this—it's different for everybody, but there can be a general

trajectory, although nothing's linear, of course. In the early days of a retreat, the content—I mean, we're still cultivating steady awareness, and it doesn't matter what the content is—but the content tends to be more on the personality level of things. When you come into a retreat, the stuff you've been doing at home, the thoughts, are a little more engaged with our everyday life. But also, in really seeing—and this is a necessary and important aspect of practice—there's a great deal of practice where, with the steady awareness, what's naturally being revealed is aspects of our personality patterns.

A lot of you have been saying that. And it's very insightful and very liberating. We're seeing our personal conditioning. Maybe we haven't recognized from some of our past experience how that's affected habit patterns and emotional patterns that arise with frequency here and in our lives. And we start to see that. Or we already thought we knew it completely, but information comes up and we recognize it on a deeper level.

It's really interesting. But with awareness, it's not like this isn't equally important practice, because awareness is able to recognize, wisdom is able to recognize this. It's fascinating—we can see it on the level of how the conditions come together to create this particular mood, this particular habit. And even though it seems like it's all about *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*, all about me and my personality, if you really look when there's mindfulness and wisdom, that's the content, but we're really seeing the process—the process of conditioning, the process of how that works.

And then when there's wisdom that notices, there's often a moment where the knee-jerk reaction doesn't have to happen. Do you know what I mean? I noticed for myself that it was really kind of fun to watch, just watching the conditions roll out automatically when there's a particular trigger.

Just a silly little thing I wrote down when I was on retreat, when I was aware. I was pretty aware. And my phone vibrated. And I was in quiet, didn't want to talk to anyone. So immediately—and this is all like ten times faster than I can say it; I wrote it down because I wouldn't remember it all—the phone vibrates, and immediately: "Oh, who's calling me? I get all these phishing phone calls. I should call the do-not-call list, but I did put it on the do-not-call. Why are these all happening? I don't want to answer it." And there's this immediate aversion, very solid, very solid me—just like that, maybe a second.

And then awareness came in and just said, "Wow, look at that. Just a vibrating phone and this whole habit pattern of craving and aversion in a particular state came up like that." You just punch the button and the whole thing rolls out. But as soon as there was awareness, the whole thing dissipated. And it was really interesting to see.

As Sayadaw says, awareness breaks the chain of events. So instead of going on or saying, "Oh, what's the matter with you? You should feel compassion," or whatever—look at that. Press the button. Boom. It comes out. Awareness is here. It dissipates. Really fascinating.

And that is really not about taking it as a personal thought, but really seeing the causes and conditions

that give rise to a sense of self. And then the conditions change. Awareness comes in. They dissipate. It's nothing to get upset about, but it's really interesting to understand. There's a lot more wisdom, and there's the chance for those conditions not to so absolutely take over every time.

Once we see it, once awareness-wisdom sees it, the next time it happens, if there's a modicum of awareness—I mean, it'll happen and there isn't, but then the awareness will come and you'll see it—there's a chance not to react with the aversion, not to react in that way.

This is really equally important as objects of awareness leading to wisdom, not just personal wisdom. I mean, when it's happening in our practice, it's really interesting, for sure. But sometimes people can think, "Well, that's okay, but we're still on the personal level, and we want to get down to the nitty-gritty. I just want to see perception and vedanā arising. I just want to see how the thought comes up. I just want to see dependent origination. I don't want to be bothered by all these personality patterns."

But as Dīpama Kenzei was saying, it's equally empty. It's just a different content.

With mindfulness and wisdom, with right attitude, we're really seeing the emptiness. This is from Tejaniya. He says that emotions, although being experienced in the moment, are there because of past causes and conditions that are having an impact in the present moment. That's really what we see.

I don't know about you, but I find that my mind takes emotions so personally, especially unpleasant ones—even when I absolutely know. I guess that's not absolutely. I think I absolutely know. I sort of absolutely know, but not absolutely yet. Emotions are just as he's saying. They're causes and conditions. They come together. I know they're going to pass.

When you're in the middle of that despair, or just that aversion again, or that hot flash, and you think, "I know this is going to pass. I know it's going to pass." But part of the emotion itself is the belief that it's going to be like this forever. That's the emotion doing its job: "I'm going to be here forever, so just get used to it."

So we see that emotions are arising in the moment because of past causes and conditions having an impact on the present moment. But we need to remind ourselves that it is a process. It's natural. And so we just recognize that it's natural and allow ourselves to observe it. We need to appreciate that we are actually aware—even when it seems we're in the midst of a difficult emotion—appreciate that we're actually aware, and to initiate awareness rather than complain about the experience. This is practicing Right View.

Talking to many people these past couple of days, hearing about difficult emotions or some turmoil or just another conditioned habit like mine with the phone—there's this sense of, "Yeah, I know there's some mindfulness, but it keeps going." You can feel a discouragement, a not really recognizing that mindfulness and awareness are quite activated. But that doesn't necessarily mean the pattern stops. It just means consciousness has the ability to observe it, to recognize how it's working a little better. It doesn't mean it

stops working, but really recognizing that you can activate awareness.

It can be flipping back and forth, especially with strong patterns. But just keep remembering awareness. Take refuge in awareness. Not because "I hate this thing, and if I take refuge in awareness, it'll go away." That's not refuge in awareness—that's aversion. But just recognize, "Oh, it's like this now." Just recognizing that.

So calling this "studying the self" is also part of our process of purification and part of deepening understanding. Then at other times in our practice—whether in retreat or daily life—the same habits or similar emotions can arise. Of course they're not exactly the same; it's a different time. But it's a pattern we really recognize, one that previously felt like it was being met with right attitude. There was a brightness in the mind, the interest.

But later, the same things can come up, and this is where we move into "to study the self is to forget the self." Something arises and it's just kind of like, "I really don't need to go there." Not out of aversion, but out of really seeing that at this point, it's an old habit—like a shadow of an old habit arising. We could jump into it and go down the whole path, but it's actually completely unnecessary. In that moment, there's enough awareness listening. "I don't need to feed that." Change the channel. And this happens naturally.

I'm not saying you should do that. But here's an example: some years ago, I wasn't on retreat, but I was sitting and—I don't know what was going on—but the habit of self-judgment and self-hatred, that familiar "you're not good enough" arose. Sometimes it's just thoughts, but sometimes it comes in like this really heavy cloud. I can feel it coming before I even recognize it's already there. I feel it, and I sense this negative tinge over everything, and it's really heavy.

So seeing this coming in, seeing why, just watching it. And then there's this habit, a belief really, that since it's here, to be wise and mindful I have to really be with it—note it, feel it, not avoid it, name it, feel the heaviness, really be there.

But then some piece of wisdom came in and asked: Do I? I actually completely know all the antecedents. I know why it's coming. There's no personality reason I need to explore this. So I thought, what if I don't go "oh, it's so heavy, heavy, hatred feels like this"? What if I just say one line of mettā?

And it was like that—like a wise presence. It was that sense of relaxed awareness, not aversion. Just say one line of mettā. Not "I've got to do mettā." Just say one line.

Okay. I said, "May I be happy and peaceful."

And the whole thing just dropped away. Not the mettā—the other thing. Just dropped away. Oh yeah, may I be happy. It wasn't like I went into the bliss of oneness or something, but it just shifted to a wholesome mind state. I realized that when there's wisdom in the mind, it's not that we have to follow the personality seven million trillion times ad nauseam. It is empty. In that moment, the emptiness is apparent. Let's

cultivate the wholesome, and it's right there. And you know it's possible like that because it *is* right there. You're not fighting about it.

But there are other times, of course, when the whole personality story just isn't what's arising. This isn't like it's better. It's not like you should make that happen, or that it's linear. But sometimes it's just like that—it's enough already. That stuff loses its interest, completely loses its interest. Sometimes the Carol story is the most interesting thing going. And other times—really?

One time I was doing a three-month retreat, and I had seen a movie just prior to that retreat. I don't know if any of you have had that unpleasant experience. You should really pay attention to what movies you put in your mind before you come on retreat, I tell you.

So this was some thriller—Harrison Ford in *The Fugitive*, I remember. I was sitting there, and the Carol story would be going, and then Harrison Ford would start with all of that, and then my story would start, then Harrison Ford would start. After a while, I realized they were equal. It was just images and thoughts and emotions coming up. One wasn't more or less me than the other. Actually, the Carol one was less interesting.

But I really saw: it's just conditions coming together. And it's a view that makes whatever was going on with the Carol story—I can't even remember what it was—seem more real.

So we can really start to explore that. And that kind of forgetting the self is partly when it just isn't arising.

That happens naturally. But also when we can just see we don't have to feed that interest in me. Sometimes there's a belief we have to explore it too much.

Ajahn Sumedho made an interesting comment in one talk I was listening to. He was, of course, talking about awareness, and he says, you know, awareness has been available to us since our childhood. But we just don't recognize it because we've been so absorbed with attention into ourselves. We're absorbed into attention into our bodies, our emotions, our personality. He says we're obsessed with ourselves.

And I can see that, right? It's so interesting that there's any other object, but ourselves is usually the most compelling one, that we just don't notice the possibility of awareness. And so this sense of forgetting the self—it's interesting that he kept on talking about that.

I use his phrase a lot where he says, "It's just like this now," as a way of just relaxing, surrendering into just what is. And as I said, I use that frequently myself. And I notice when I use that, when it's helpful as a wisdom prompt, is when I'm feeling all caught up and circling around something. If it's just unpleasant and I know it, that's okay. But when somehow it's all confused, all coagulated, usually caught up, identified in some way—he says, "It's like this."

But then he goes on to say, and I totally related to this—he said, "When I say 'it's like this,' I used to try and see why it's like this. But now I just go, 'It's like this.'" Because the trying to see why would take me into

analyzing. It would take me back into the whole world of Ajahn Sumedho.

And I really have found this so frequently with myself. This can be more—not so much when I'm in the Carol's story—but at times when the Carol's story can come up in the background, but I think I'm just looking at subtlety in practice. And I'm looking at saññā. And I'm looking at vedanā. And I'm looking at how things come together. And I'm just seeing the emptiness and seeing awareness. But somehow, it seems like I see the clinging come, I see it go, and I think I'm mindful of it all, but it's feeling like it's getting more and more tight in some kind of ball or something, right? And it feels like I'm mindful. It's not spacing out. I can't see why, so I'm trying to see. "It's like this now." Like what? Well, there's clinging. I can really see—she completely takes me into whatever's going on. "It's like this now," without trying to analyze, without trying to see what.

Because with that awareness—this is Sumedho again—awareness does not get involved in the sankhara. You know, sankhara, the mental formations, everything that's going on. Awareness isn't trying to figure them out at all. It's radical. You relate to that quality, but we're like, "Okay, it's like this now. How?" It doesn't matter. You don't need to know. Is it clinging or is it aversion? Who needs to know? Who wants to know? "It's like this now." No, I have to know that, right? I have to know how it works. If I'm caught in clinging and I don't know it, I'm going to get caught more and I better see it. "It's like this now." Tightness, boss.

And that awareness isn't getting involved in sankhara. No need to fix the self.

No need to improve the sankhāras. No need—this is Ajahn Sumedho again—no need to do anything. "It's like this now" is again taking refuge in awareness. Sumedho calls awareness the escape hatch from saṃsāra, from birth and death. So in that moment, he's calling that moment—"it's like this now"—an escape hatch from saṃsāra. Saṃsāra, the wanting, the spinning, the trying to figure it out. Just, "Ah, it's like this." In that moment, nothing's born and nothing dies. That's what he's talking about.

I find it, at times, really hard to trust that radical surrender. And so we have talked here about when awareness is available but we're not so completely absorbed, when it doesn't have so much momentum—the times when the trust is easy. But it isn't always that clear. And the trust isn't always so easy. We think, "Ah, it's like this... but I've got to figure this out. This awareness is so feeble. What awareness?" And then we're off on it.

So to really determine, as Ajahn Sumedho says, to trust awareness in those moments—this is really what, in a way, is strengthening the habit of freedom rather than the habit of identification, forgetting the self.

I just want to acknowledge that it's a really delicate balance between recognizing the emptiness, the non-personal, conditional, contingent nature of all of our emotions, all of our conditions, all of our personality patterns—not just some of them, all of it—and what's sometimes called spiritual bypassing, or delusion. "Oh yeah, right, I know what that is." Subtle pushing away. This is something I want to mention

so we can have an awareness of it and explore it in our practice. I'm not saying I have the last word. I just want to make a couple of comments about that.

In terms of recognizing the emptiness, the conditional nature of any strong emotional experience, that doesn't mean not feeling it. But it means it's not an identification, it's not resistant, we're not caught up in the "all about me."

One of my favorite quotations is from Dilgo Khyentse about this:

"Thoughts and feelings have no intrinsic solidity, form, shape, or color. So when a thought, a feeling of anger, arises in the mind, in the heart, with such force that you feel aggressive and destructive—is anger brandishing a weapon? Can it burn things like fire, crush them like a rock, or carry them away like a violent river?"

He's not talking about the body acting. He says, "No, anger, like any other thought or feeling, has no intrinsic self-existence, not even a definite location in body, speech, or mind. It is just like wind roaring in empty space. So instead of allowing wild thoughts to enslave you, realize their essential emptiness."

We feel it, but we just let the wind roar in empty space. That's really kind of how it is. "When you can see through the hatred within, you discover there's not a single enemy outside." I just like that line—the wind roaring in empty space. Really seeing that.

Recognizing the non-personality, the emptiness—it doesn't change what's occurring. Emptiness is a mode of perception, a way of looking at experience. It adds nothing to and takes nothing away from the raw data of physical and mental events. So it's really present with what's going on. We may get information from it. We may not. But you can tell it's not bypassing, it's not delusion, because you can see there's that quality of wise attitude. There's a kind of brightness, an interest in the mind. It's not contracted. It's not closed off. We can start to recognize that.

The bypassing can be obvious, just illusion. "No, I don't want to feel that. That's not happening."

Denial is an amazing force. Have you ever noticed what an amazing force it is? For example, say you get into a relationship, and then some years later it ends. When it ends, you think, "Wow, look at all those qualities in that person." And if you think about the things that led to the ending, if you really think about it, you knew that. You knew that from the first week—those things were obvious. It's really amazing. It's totally amazing to me, the power of denial.

So it's tricky. We're not always going to see through it. The bypassing can look very similar to genuine mindfulness, but there's this quality—it can be gross or much more subtle—of just a little bit of pushing away. The difficult thing or the habit pattern comes up and we're sort of mindful of it. You could name it all. Like when I was describing the self-hatred, I could name it all. But if it had been bypassing, it would have been, "Okay, I know all that. I don't need to go there. Let's do something else." The quality in the

heart-mind, the quality in the awareness wouldn't have that brightness. And it wouldn't just automatically vanish—it would just kind of push it away and go somewhere else. It can be a very, very subtle habit of aversion, of not seeing.

This is where I think we're starting to see through this—if we are, because we flip back and forth in this kind of bypassing or subtle denying—where our steady mindfulness and all our years of practice in all the different traditions we do, where we're not picking and choosing, only paying attention to what we like or what feels valuable. The steadiness of awareness gives us the power of what the British writer George Orwell called "the power of facing unpleasant facts." I think that's a huge liberating aspect of our awareness practice. It just gives us the power of being present with unpleasant facts. And this is where spiritual bypassing or just pushing away a certain pattern—we don't quite see it because we aren't quite resting in that unpleasant fact.

A simple example: I was on retreat, a self-retreat in Switzerland, staying in a friend's apartment near the meditation center where we teach. It's kind of up in the mountains—lower mountains in Switzerland, about four thousand feet, not really mountains, more like hills, but pretty. I was walking on the road, just a regular road with farms around, and I was aware, nothing special going on. A lady came approaching me, and she had some kind of pamphlet or something in her hand. She came up to me and said something in German, which I can understand some of, but my mind goes into a kind of panic when someone addresses me that way. I didn't get what she said—I could only construct it later—and she's showing this thing to me.

Immediately I saw a lady with a pamphlet and I went into this whole thing: "This is like Jehovah's Witness, and they're trying to pull me into something." And I responded, "I don't understand, I don't speak German." And I went away with this aversion, just like that. It happened in no time, just the habit coming. The sense of it being unpleasant, her coming at me with the thing. I associated it with Jehovah's Witness, I didn't want to deal with her, it was unpleasant. So I pushed the whole thing away—get out of here, lady—and I walked off.

Then one second later, I reconstructed what I thought she had said, and I think she was asking for directions. Definitely wasn't Jehovah's Witness. And I felt really bad. But I saw—I really appreciated it—because I could see, even though this awareness came in after, I could see again how that whole pattern comes, and how I respond out of that.

And the response, if I hadn't been aware, the response is really, "I don't want to feel that discomfort of this person asking me for something."

I can feel that when you're driving and there's so many more people these days standing on the highways, on the intersections with signs that they're homeless, they're vets, they don't have jobs, they need money. And I mean, it's just heartbreaking. And I can see that same habit come up in my mind. I don't want to have to interact. I don't want someone pushing something in my face.

And so the bypassing, in a way, going with that habit is just bypassing being able to be with the unpleasantness of just feeling that awkwardness, feeling that discomfort. But awareness lets it be okay. You don't need to bypass. You can really have the power of being with the unpleasant fact. This person's putting this thing in your face. You think it's unpleasant. You don't even know. Can you hang out with that? Can you just hang out with that? And then we're not bypassing anymore.

But you see, it can be so subtle. "No, I don't need to do that. I don't need to do that. Go away." And we don't recognize that it's just a habit of avoiding.

Okay, that's all I have time for, so I'll just end by saying those are just some things I wanted to drop in about looking at the different ways of studying the self and forgetting the self and opening to be enlightened by the ten thousand things—meaning what I said Doug had said earlier: the truth is right where you are. Where else can you expect to find it?

And it doesn't mean we don't feel or don't care or lose our personality. I'm sorry to tell you. You just get like more who you are in some way when you know it's empty.

And so just with two quotations, let's finish. The line from T.S. Eliot: "Teach me to care and not to care. Teach me to sit still." In a different way, from a different angle. And sometimes it's even more deeply touching when it's not personal. It's not that we don't feel things anymore.

So I'll just end with my favorite haiku from Issa. He wrote this on the death of his young daughter. He said:

This dewdrop world is a dewdrop world. And yet, and yet.

That's how it is.

Thanks for your attention.

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