Suffering and the Illusion of Self

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:07:42

There's one basic teaching common to all the traditions of Buddhism, in whatever culture or country it manifests, and that is the teaching on the Four Noble Truths. They really encapsulate the dilemma that faces us and the possibility—the experience, the realization—of freedom.

One of the things that's so amazing about Dharma practice is that it's like a hologram. Whatever part we look at, whatever perspective, whatever angle we're coming from, any part reveals the whole, if we look deeply enough.

So what is the first noble truth of the Buddha's teaching? The first noble truth is the truth of suffering. The Buddha saw the basic problem inherent in existence because he saw that in the realm of conditioned phenomena, suffering is inherent, inevitable. What does conditioned phenomena mean? It's simple—it means everything. Everything that arises out of conditions. That's what conditioned means: things which arise out of causes. So everything in the phenomenal world is a conditioned phenomenon, and therefore unsatisfying.

The Pali word for suffering is dukkha, and there's a wide variety of translations. It means suffering, unsatisfactoriness, unreliable. How do we experience this? The great task for us is somehow to bring the abstraction of the teachings to connect with our actual experience. To study it as philosophy or comparative religion may be of some interest, but that's not really what transforms us. We really have to connect it to our own experience.

So what is this truth of suffering? The Buddha talked of three kinds. The first kind are those experiences which are painful in themselves. He called this dukkha dukkha, just to emphasize the point. This suffering that is painful in itself is really pervasive in the world. A lot of you are working right in the midst of it. We see political and social injustice and exploitation in so many different realms—the pain, the suffering of war, of violence, of cruelty, of hunger. These are conditions which are suffering just in and of themselves. They're painful to be with.

We can feel this dukkha dukkha, this pain, in our own bodies. When we have painful sensations, or through the process of getting older and weaker, getting sick, getting diseased—and often the process of dying is a painful one. We can see this suffering in the world. We can see it in our bodies. We can see this suffering in our own minds, all of the painful, unpleasant mind states. And there is a long list: anger, hatred, fear, boredom, jealousy, despair, discouragement, frustration, loneliness, unworthiness, self-hatred. Enough, enough already.

What's important is that we recognize this, that we're really open to it as a significant part of life experience. This is part of being alive. As I mentioned the other night, it's not that it's a mistake. This is part of our experience. This is the first kind of suffering that we can really connect with, be with, open to. It's in the world, it's in ourselves.

The second kind of suffering is the suffering that comes out of the impermanence of things. It's really the suffering of conditions being unreliable. We keep looking in our lives for happiness, for a lasting happiness in this conditioned world, and it never quite arrives. Have you noticed how we live our lives very often just waiting for the next nice event? The next vacation, or the next weekend, or the right relationship, or whatever.

And it's always, it seems as if this completion or happiness is always just ahead of us. If only this happened, if only this happened, if only this happened. But of course, even when they do happen, it is happiness for a time and then it's gone. Because the very nature of all conditioned things is change, impermanence. If we're looking for a lasting happiness in that which is not lasting, it's not a good move. Because we're looking in an arena which cannot provide what we're looking for.

And yet, we keep doing this. Sometimes in reflecting on this, I think back to all the wonderful experiences, the different ones that have happened in my life. Where are they? They were wonderful at the time and they're gone. So this is another kind of dukkha, another kind of unsatisfactoriness—really connecting with the unreliability of phenomena to provide a lasting happiness for us. So we can finally maybe start looking in the appropriate place.

There's a third kind of dukkha, and the Pali word for it is sankhara dukkha. It's the suffering of having to expend energy to keep things together. I told my house story the other night. It was great—I moved into my house and I was really enjoying it. But after a very short time living in it, I made this great discovery. I discovered that not doing anything, it got dirty. And that I had to clean it.

So my mind made this connection between this first noble truth, the truth of suffering, and the second law of thermodynamics, which I know almost nothing about, except the general principle that things tend toward disorder. Systems tend toward disorder. And so to keep them in order, it requires the input of energy. We're here for ten days. Our clothes get dirty. They need to be cleaned. We need to do whatever we do to have enough to eat. There's always this expenditure of effort and energy just to keep things together. So that's another kind of dukkha, another kind of suffering.

It really comes down to something very simple, this first noble truth. It can be summed up. All of these different kinds of suffering can be summed up: when we're associated with what we don't want, it's suffering. And when we're separated from what we do want, it's suffering. This is the push-pull that's happening throughout our lives. When we're with what we don't want, we suffer. When we're separated from what we like, we suffer. When we resist what comes, there's suffering. When we hold on to what's changing, we suffer.

So one question arises: so what? Why should we pay attention to all this? People seem to be living their lives who never give a moment's thought to any of this. Why should we? Why should we make this enormous effort?

I'll tell you. I'm not taking any chances. Because it really takes a very great kind of openness, and really a great courage, to see what is actually there. It's very easy to live—and I think we do much of the time, and many people do most of the time—it's very easy to live in a state of resistance, in a state of avoidance, in a state of denial. You're probably dealing with it a tremendous amount—people who are just not willing to open to see what is actually going on, the suffering that's there.

There's one story which epitomizes this tendency. A friend of mine told it to me. It was a story of his grandfather in the early forties, driving with his father

So the grandfather was driving with his son, and it was December 7th, 1941. They heard on the radio the news of Pearl Harbor. And the first thing the grandfather said to my friend's father was, "Don't tell your mother."

Now that's a hard one to avoid. That takes a real special effort. She probably finally found out. Of course, what's instructive is that we can laugh at that, and yet in our own ways we're all doing it. So we really need to see how it is that we avoid or deny or resist.

There are two very important implications of this way of living. One is that very often, in the very process of resisting whatever unpleasantness or suffering, the resistance is actually feeding that which we don't want to let in. So it's not a very productive strategy.

Just as a few examples: when there's pain in the body and we resist it rather than open to it, what's happening? We're tensing behind it, creating more pain. Our very avoidance of it is strengthening it. And the same thing happens with our resistance or avoidance of unpleasant thought forms or mind states. The more we resist them, the more they're fed, because we're imputing a reality to them which they don't actually have.

When we resist feeling anger or sadness or whatever it is, or certain thought forms in the mind, when we resist them and we don't want to see them or feel them, we're actually feeding them because we're giving them a concrete reality which in their nature they don't have at all.

An image came to mind some time ago as a way of relating to all of these unpleasant aspects of the mind which we might have a tendency to resist or avoid. I thought of it particularly with regard to the hindrances—desire and aversion and sleepiness and restlessness and doubt—but it could be anything. It could be states of fear or cruelty, whatever we don't want to let in.

It reminded me of kids in Halloween costumes. On Halloween, kids come to your door and they're all dressed up. The pirate comes—do you get frightened? Probably not, because you know it's just a kid in

costume. So you give them candy or whatever. All of these thoughts, all of these thought forms which seem so fearsome to us are nothing more than kids in Halloween costumes. If we believe the costume, then we resist. "Get away. I don't want to be with you. Leave my doorway." When we see that it's just a costume, it's no problem at all. We can have a real loving relationship with them.

So this is the first implication of avoiding or resisting suffering—that we're actually feeding it. There's a second implication, which perhaps is more touching. When we live in a way that closes us off to the experience, to the awareness of suffering, when we become defended against it or armored against it or protected from it, what happens is that we are also closing off the wellspring of our compassion. And so it's a very significant consequence.

How does this happen? Compassion is that feeling in the heart that wants to alleviate the suffering that exists in the world, in other people, in ourselves. It's that movement to action. It sees suffering, it's open to it, and it wants to do something about it. That's the power of compassion.

It's described really beautifully by a little haiku poem by Ryokan. He was an eighteenth-century Zen poet, hermit, and monk, with very wonderful poetry.

He said, "Oh, that my monk's robes were wide enough to gather up all of the people in this floating world." That's a feeling of compassion. "Oh, that my monk's robes were wide enough to gather up all of the people in this floating world."

What opens us, what connects us to this feeling of compassion is precisely our ability to open up to experience the suffering that's there. So this realization of the First Noble Truth is essential. It's like the foundation of our spiritual path.

There's a very critical discrimination that has to be made here, and it's particularly critical for people who are already open to suffering and trying to alleviate it. That is the distinction between compassion and sorrow. These are two very different mind states. Both of them are responses to suffering—we can feel compassion, we can feel sorrow—but in sorrow there is aversion to the suffering, and in compassion there is not. It's this distinction which then leads to very different kinds of responses.

We really have to see this clearly. If we respond to suffering with aversion—aversion to it, we don't like it—the reactions that come from that aversion are sorrow, anger, hatred, fear. These become the motives for action, and they're not very constructive motives. When there's openness to the suffering rather than aversion to it, then our response is one of compassion.

Do you see the difference between these two? They start from a place that's very close. It's said that sorrow is the near enemy of compassion, which in Buddhist jargon means that it's a mind state which looks like compassion. We can mistake it for compassion, but it is not. These are two states of mind very close, but they end up in very different places.

Sometimes it's hard to see how we cannot have aversion to the immensity of suffering in the world. As you deal with the problems that you deal with and perhaps contemplate even much larger ones, how can we not feel aversion or hatred or anger towards the things that are going on?

I think it's helpful to look at our own experience of suffering because it gives us insight into the importance of this distinction. You're sitting here in the hall, sitting with this agonizing pain in the knee. Does hating the pain contribute in any way to its alleviation? No. It just further creates a struggle. The hating of the suffering, the hating of the pain, the aversion towards the pain does not contribute to the alleviation of it.

If you're sitting and you're having a run of awful mind states, awful thoughts—you're the worst person in the world, thoughts of cruelty and revenge, just imagine your worst kinds of thoughts—does hating those thoughts in any way alleviate the suffering of them? No. It just further pollutes the whole internal environment.

If we can be with the pain in ourselves—the pain in the knee, the painful thoughts, the painful emotions—with a sense of caring, with a sense of loving, with a sense of openness as opposed to aversion, then it is much easier to actually alleviate, to create a healing space. And the same thing that's true for us is true for the suffering in the world. Aversion towards it does not help.

So we need to see, we really need to examine within ourselves and learn to discriminate between the feelings of sorrow which may come and the feeling of compassion. We must get very clear about the difference.

This is a really difficult practice. It is not easy to open ourselves to suffering, to really be open—not with aversion, not with hatred—but just to let it all in. It's precisely because this is our practice that the realization of the First Noble Truth is the practice of compassion. To the degree that we realize, we open to, we're aware of the suffering that exists in ourselves and in the world, this is the practice of letting everything in, not holding anything aside. We let all the conditions of the world in. We let all kinds of people in—our friends as well as our adversaries. We let all the sides of ourselves in.

This past year I saw two movies which really had quite an impact on me. They both had the same theme: how compassion grows from letting suffering in. One was Schindler's List, of course. And the other was a movie called Romero—I don't know if you saw that. It was about the archbishop in El Salvador.

And both of them started with beings who were in the midst of tremendous suffering but basically closed off to it in one way or another. Both movies portrayed the gradual opening of these people to the suffering that was around them, and the outpouring of compassionate action that took place. What was quite amazing was that even though they were documenting the most horrendous suffering, both movies were tremendously inspiring to me because they showed the power that can come when we open ourselves to this—open ourselves with compassion rather than sorrow, with openness rather than aversion. That's the

key. That's the key point.

All of this is summed up again in a Japanese haiku. I love Japanese aesthetic because it's so exquisite. There's another little poem by Isa, who I've mentioned before. It says: "In the cherry blossom's shade, there's no such thing as a stranger." It just expresses for me this quality of opening to it all, of letting it all in. In the cherry blossom's shade, there's no such thing as a stranger.

So this is the first noble truth of the Buddhist teaching. It's about suffering and opening to it, and the compassion that comes from that.

The second noble truth of the Buddha's teaching is the cause of suffering. Why is there so much suffering in the world? Mostly we relate to it, both in ourselves and other people, on the level of symptoms. We're dealing with the symptoms of the suffering. What the Buddha saw—and this is the greatness of enlightenment—was the root cause of suffering. Why is it in the world? Why is it so pervasive?

No matter what we do, and this came up the other night in a little discussion, we can make our best efforts to really alleviate the pain that's here. But as long as there is greed in the mind, as long as there is fear in the mind, as long as there is hatred in the mind, as long as there is ignorance in the mind, suffering will continue. Because at its root it's not a question of fixing something. We want to fix what we can. We want to alleviate the symptoms. But the real root of it are these basic forces in people's minds. It's because of greed that there's so much injustice. It's because of hatred. It's because of fear. These are the underlying causes.

Now there's one aspect of ignorance which actually underlies all of these other unwholesome forces in the mind. There's one source point for suffering. There's one root cause. It is the great hallucination of our lives. We are living in a massive hallucination. And that is the very deeply conditioned idea or concept we have of self, of "I." Our lives embody this. They revolve about this notion of self, this notion of I. It's the construction of a reference point—a reference point of I to whom all experience is happening. So everything comes back to this: I'm feeling, I'm thinking, everything's back to that reference point.

As soon as there is the construction, the fabrication of the sense of self, automatically following from it is the sense of other. If there is self, built into the feeling of self is the feeling of other. So from the very beginning there is separation, there is duality. And it's in this context of self that so many unskillful actions proceed.

If there's a self—and whether we consider this personally, a personal self, or our national self—what happens? As soon as there's this notion, we need to defend it, we need to protect it, we need to gratify it, we need to aggrandize it. All of these unwholesome actions are happening based on this notion of a self, an I, a me, a mine. And it's this concept of self to which all suffering adheres.

What is so amazing about all of this is that we're making it all up. This is the hallucination. It's not something that is real. It's not something that is true. But it is a massively ingrained habit of mind. What

does it mean to say that there's no self? Because often we hear it—

And for a major part of our mind, it doesn't make any sense at all. What does it mean to say there's no I, there's no one behind the process to whom it's happening? Who came here? Who's sitting in the hall? If there's no I, there's no self, who are all of you? Not to speak of me. Who has memories? Who falls in love? Who gets angry? All of these questions arise, and they're very commonsense questions.

We're talking about something that is very deep and very profound, something that goes well beyond our conventional notions of what is true and what is real. Sometimes people, even in hearing the notion of selflessness, get afraid. Perhaps the mind conjures up this image of just disappearing in a great cosmic flash—suddenly you're here and then you're not here. Oops. What will my family think?

But it's really not that at all. The deep understanding, the realization of selflessness—that is really the jewel of the Buddhist teachings. It's at the heart of a free mind. So how can we begin to understand it? How can we begin to touch that realization?

In order to have a framework for understanding what selflessness means, we need to look at the very great extent to which we live in the world of concepts. Because self is simply another concept. But mostly we have no idea how much of our experience of the world is really an experience of concept, not of reality. And that's why we get deluded into thinking that self is also true.

I'd like to give you some examples, but let me frame it first. Most of you are probably familiar with the famous parable of the cave in Plato's Republic. It's a very good metaphor for this. There's a cave, and people are chained in the cave in such a way that they can only face the back wall. Behind this row of people is a fire, and then there's a procession of figures going by, engaged in all the activities of life, casting shadows on the back wall of the cave. The people who are chained in the cave and can't turn around—all they see are the shadows. And so they take the shadows to be what's real, what's true.

Sometimes one person perhaps makes a great effort and loosens the chain and turns around and says, "Oh, there's fire, there are figures—the shadows aren't real at all. They're just a reflection of reality." And maybe with even greater effort, they cut the chains and can go into the sunlight, into freedom. To the extent that we are living in the world of concept, it's like being chained in that cave.

So what are some of the concepts that in many ways dominate our own lives personally and condition so much of what's happening in the world? I'll mention just a few—there are endless examples.

One of them we could call the concept of place, as if the world is actually divided up into separate states and countries. There's one story which reveals something ridiculous about this. It was told to me by a Greek friend who was traveling to India. Because she was Greek, she couldn't go through Turkey, so she had to go up through Russia and down through Iran, which was then—this was years ago—open. She described the border crossing between Russia and Iran. She said it was the middle of no place. Just a big, dry, barren, arid expanse. There was a dry riverbed, and over the riverbed was this huge bridge. In the

middle of the bridge was a big iron gate, locked from both sides. Just picture the scene: we're in the middle of no place, nothing around for miles, and there's this bridge with a gate in the middle.

And to cross from Russia into Iran, the guards from one side had to go and open the gate, the guards from the other side had to go and open it, she had to get her passport stamped, and she crossed the border. It's like a Fellini movie. And yet, had she not done that, there would have been serious consequences, because people are very attached to this notion, to this concept.

You know, our attachment to this concept of place obscures a much more natural order of things. And there are many examples. When you think just of post-colonial Africa and how the countries were carved up, often without regard at all to the natural tribal alignments—so much of what's happening now is because of conflicts coming out of that arbitrary concept of place. Or even within the environmental movement, dealing with environmental issues. The difference between having to address them state by state, county by county, as opposed to perhaps looking at a whole bioregion and its interdependence. But our boundaries, our concepts, have fixed things in such a way that it obscures a more harmonious relationship.

That's just one concept. Another one, which perhaps touches us personally more directly—this is huge—is the concept of time. We have created concepts of past and future which dominate our lives. It's very instructive to look incisively at what our experience of past and future actually is. We take these things so for granted, we never really stop and examine. What is this thing we call past? How do we experience it?

It's amazingly simple. We're sitting here, minding our own business. Certain kinds of thoughts come—recollections, memories, images, remembrances. We make a category. We make a concept for these kinds of thoughts or images. We call them "past." And then somehow we toss it behind us, as if the past is a reality back there. Yet when we look carefully, how do we ever know the past? It's always as a thought in the moment.

This was the great and wonderful insight in Proust's masterpiece, *Remembrance of Things Past*. I read this years ago. I was in the Peace Corps, those long Bangkok afternoons. I plowed through those two thousand pages. The last—I mean, it was a wonderful book, but the last fifty pages were mind-blowing, because the whole book led up to this transforming insight: that the past is in the present. That's how we know the past, as a thought in the present.

Likewise the future. This great, big, looming future about which we have anticipation, hope, excitement, despair, whatever. What is it? How do we ever experience the future? We're sitting, certain thoughts come, certain images come. We label them "future," toss them out there. The future is out there waiting for us, waiting to get us.

You know, a thought is very light, very light. But the concept of past and future? Mountainous. To be walking through one's life carrying these mountains on one's shoulders—no wonder people feel

burdened. But when we really see it, that's just a thought in the moment. It's a thought we may want to explore and deal with and respond to, but it is just a thought. There's an amazing collapse into the moment when we see this, when we realize this. The whole weight of past and future are gone. It's really quite amazing.

But the concepts are so ingrained, and we invest so much reality in them, that we go through life shouldering this burden. In the course of a day here, in the course of a sitting, in the course of one walking period, how much time is spent lost in thoughts of past and future? It's enormous. It's most of our lives, because we don't see it for what it is.

Some of my most profound insights come from my favorite genre of literature, which—Proust notwithstanding—is spy books. How often in these kinds of junk books they'll quote some highbrow person at the beginning. It gives them a certain legitimacy. Well, one of these books quoted St. Augustine. It was a great quote. It said, "If the past and future really exist, where are they?" I know why I'm reading this stuff.

Look to see how thoughts of past and future condition how you feel about your present experience. A very good example: on retreat, thoughts of time. "Oh, only two more days. I wish it lasted for another month." And so there's a certain feeling generated by that thought. Or it might be, "Oh, two more days. How many more mental notes do I have to make? I can't wait to get out of here." Both of those are simply thoughts. That's all. They're a momentary thought passing through. If we see them as a thought, there's almost no impact. When we take that construct of time to be real, it creates a whole world for us.

I could go on at length about this. Concepts of place, concepts of time, concepts of ownership. People have the idea that they own things. What does it mean to own something? "This is mine!" Mark Twain wrote a wonderful story about horse traders in Russia. He told the whole story from the horse's point of view. And the horses had no idea they were owned by anybody. They were in relationship to various humans—some were kind, some were cruel—but the idea of ownership never entered their nice little heads.

We may feel that... well, imagine how you would feel coming into the room and seeing somebody sitting on your cushion. You probably wouldn't go crazy, but there'd be a moment. There would definitely be a moment. "What are they doing on my seat?" This is another form of the idea of possessiveness, of ownership. "This belongs to me."

I want to say, before going further, I do not mean to imply that concepts are not useful. All of these concepts are useful—the concepts of place, of time, of ownership, and some of the others. We need to use them. But it's when we get attached to them, when we start taking them to be the reality rather than simply a mental construct that happens to be useful in a particular situation—that's where we get lost. That's where we're in the dream.

Concepts of place, of time, of ownership. Concepts of self-image. We create a lot of concepts around our

self-image—our self-image in the world, our self-image as yogis. There are so many self-image stories. As you know now, since the third grade I had this self-image that I couldn't sing. And let me just say: certain self-images are true. They're not all false.

But to the degree that we get caught in them, it limits us.

So anyway, I was teaching at Naropa in the early years, in '74, '75, in Boulder. And I thought, well, I'm going to really work with this. I'm going to burst out of this prison. There was a class called "The Natural Voice"—kind of a new age singing class—but that's for me, I thought. So I signed up for this class, and it took a lot of courage because this image was very strong; I was identifying with it a lot.

So I go to class, and the first few classes are great. It's all group exercises and group singing, and I'm really having a good time. Then one day the regular teacher couldn't come and a substitute teacher came. She was an expert in Balkan folk singing. She had us line up in a circle, and one by one she sang a note and we were supposed to sing it back to her—match her pitch. I knew I was in very big trouble.

So we're going around, and it's getting closer and closer to me, and I'm getting more and more uptight. I'm really feeling it. She finally gets to me. She sings some note. I sing something back. It's not even close. It wasn't even in the ballpark. She was a very determined woman. She kept doing her thing. I kept trying to replicate it. Finally, the regular teacher came in. And quite skillfully, she started where I was rather than where she was, and note by note led me up to that place. When I finally got there, the whole class started to applaud. It was one of those moments.

These experiences, as they are, if we can either at the time or afterwards put them in a larger context—it was instructive because I saw the degree to which I was caught in a certain image of myself, in a certain inhibition, in a certain reluctance, and the amazing effort it took to try to break through that. We imprison ourselves in the images we create. We might create images of ourselves of being very smart or very stupid, beautiful or very ugly, very heroic or very cowardly, very this or very that. Whatever it is, it's a mold. We've just created a mold and we've poured ourselves into it. So we want to look at those personas that we create, because these also are concepts.

The last concept—which is getting back to the subject, and really it's the root one, the root cause of our suffering and the suffering in the world—is the concept of self. We have created a notion, we have created an idea of someone, of some being to whom experience is happening. But that is an illusion. And when we look carefully, we see that it is not true. When we drop into the flow of experience, we see that instead of it being this—referring back to a "me"—experience is happening like this. Everything is arising and passing. Everything remains the same. Same thoughts, same feelings, same images, same emotions, same sensations. But we're seeing them as empty phenomena rolling on. We're not claiming them as being I, as being mine.

The really important question in our practice is to see how it is that we keep creating this concept of self.

Why do we keep creating it? Because it's pervasive. We go up to anybody on the street—"Do you exist? Is there a self?"—and they'd think we were crazy. So it's very deep, really deep in our conditioning. We need to examine very carefully how it's created.

The reason we fall into the illusion of self, the reason we get lost in this concept, is because mostly we are not paying attention to the composite nature of our experience. Every morning we look in the mirror and we say, "Yeah, looks like the same guy as yesterday. This must be Joseph." And there's a kind of continuity to that.

And so we assume, yeah, there's a being called Joseph. But when we look carefully at experience, not just that surface appearance of things, when we look deeply, what is it that I'm calling Joseph? This is a name, this is a concept which I'm putting on a certain constellation of experience. When we look carefully, we see exactly what those experiences are, and we see that they're also continuously changing.

The Buddha laid out very clearly what the constellation is, and it's simple. It's really simple. What we call Joseph, self, I—each one of us—is a constellation of physical elements. We experience different sensations. We sit here and you feel pressure, tightness, tingling, the whole range. There's a whole range of physical tactile sensations. That's one aspect of the constellation. We experience consciousness, knowing. That's another part of the constellation. We experience all the mental phenomena—the thoughts and emotions and images. Each one of these in each moment is arising and passing away. Nothing lasts long enough to be called self.

When you're sitting and you feel the pressure in the knee, you don't say, "my pressure." When you're just there in awareness, it's just pressure arising. That's what's happening. It's not self. It doesn't belong to anybody. The thought arises and passes away.

But there's something more than this. Even when we get a little savvy, when we really are seeing that what we call self is a constellation of experiences, there's one other process that we get very involved in and which creates the felt sense of I. That is the process of identification with these elements.

Okay, we've gone past the appearance. We see, yes, there are sensations, there are thoughts, there are emotions, there are images, there are sounds. We see all the components. But still, unless we're very aware and attuned, in each arising we identify with it. And out of that identification, we create a concept.

I'll give you some examples of this. We're sitting. There's the pressure in the knee. As soon as there's an identification with that feeling, we create a concept around it: knee. We build a further concept: my knee. Knee, my knee—that is not the pressure. That's all a mental construct. There's knee, there's my knee, there's my knee hurts. And then there's the whole world of reaction to that: I hate it, I can be with it, I can bear it, I can't bear it. Do you see how the I is being built up on top of a very particular moment of pressure arising? That whole world of I is just a mental fabrication. It's a whole series of concepts.

We identify with thoughts in a big way. Even when we begin to see the sensations as being quite

impersonal, the thoughts that are arising in the mind—we get lost in them, caught up in them, identified with them over and over again.

I'd like to suggest a few experiments. In the next sitting, imagine every thought that arises as coming from the person next to you. It's just a way of loosening this identification with thought, as if they belong to someone. One of my teachers had a great phrase. He said, "The thought is the thinker." There's no thinker apart from the thought. The thought is thinking itself. But because we usually are not aware enough, the thought arises, we get seduced by it. We get caught up into that thought form, that mind world. And we start living in what the Buddhists call the six realms of existence—the lower realms of suffering, the higher worlds of pleasure.

Notice, in the course of the day, how many times we inhabit a mind world created by thoughts. You think of your family while you're here.

Maybe you're missing them. The thought of your family is not your family. It's a thought. But it looks like your family, it feels like it, and so we get lost in it. And then whatever attendant feelings arise—love, or missingness, whatever. Or you think of work, or you think of... Our life is a progression of little cartoon bubbles of thought. They're mind-created worlds in which we are imprisoned, until that moment of awakening: "Yeah, that's just a thought." And you're right back with the next step on the ground.

What is so amazing about bringing awareness to thought is that when we're not aware of them, they are so incredibly powerful as to dominate our lives. We are led by our thoughts. And when we are aware of them, we see that they're nothing. They're just these little, ephemeral blips, bubbles in the mind. They have no power at all. Tremendous freedom in realizing the insubstantial, empty nature of thought. And it doesn't matter what the thoughts are. They can be the worst thoughts in the world—if you see them as a thought, they come, they self-liberate. There's no effect.

We identify with sensations, we identify with thoughts, we identify with emotions. Anger comes, happiness comes, generosity comes, kindness comes. To the degree that we identify with them, we create this notion of self. "I'm angry, I'm happy, I'm sad, I'm kind, I'm generous." We are building that construct of self in our identification with the emotion. It is anger which angers. It is love which loves. It is kindness which kindnesses. There's no one behind it to whom it's happening. Each of these emotions, each of these aspects of experience are doing themselves.

The last thing that we identify with—and most subtle—is awareness itself. We identify with the knower and so create the sense of witness. "Okay, I know everything else is changing, everything else is impersonal, everything else is not me, but I'm the one who's knowing it all." As soon as we identify with awareness, with consciousness, we obscure the natural empty clarity which is its nature. Awareness doesn't belong to anybody. If we look carefully, if we're really attentive, we can recognize and abide in the empty nature of awareness itself. And from that space, everything is simply appearing and vanishing, appearing and disappearing in this great, clear, open space of awareness, of emptiness. They're

synonymous.

Through the awareness of suffering, we open to compassion. Through the awareness of selflessness, we open to wisdom. And this is what our practice is about. As we see how the sense of self is constructed, as we begin to see that it is just a concept, a mental fabrication, we abide more and more in that place of emptiness.

And it's expressed—and I'll end with this, finally—in a little poem by Li Po, a great Chinese poet. He said, "We sit together, the mountain and me, until only the mountain remains." We sit together, the mountain and me. We sit together, the breeze and me. We sit together, the thought and me. We sit together, the sensation and me. We sit together, the mountain and me, until only the mountain remains. We stop constructing the sense of I, the sense of self. And then we start abiding just in the natural purity of things.

A summing up of all of this was expressed very beautifully by Kalu Rinpoche, one of the great Tibetan masters. He said, "We live in illusion and the appearance of things. There is a reality.

We are that reality. When we understand this, we see we are nothing. And being nothing, we are everything. That is all.

We live in illusion, in the appearance of things. We live in the world of concepts and constructs. There is a reality. We are that reality. When we understand this, we see we are nothing. And being nothing, we are everything.

That is all.

Let's sit together for a few minutes.

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