Anattā

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:00:02

Tonight I want to talk about a specific aspect of the teachings, something that Steve spoke of a bit last night, and that is anattā, or the fact that there's no one here doing all of this. I really want to look at it from the perspective of deconstructing in our experience this sense of self that seems so solid.

Someone asked the Buddha once, "What is the one thing that liberated ones know that we don't, that makes them different?" And he said, "Knowing that nothing whatsoever should be clung to." Nothing. If we really knew that, we would be liberated. This whole dilemma we seem to find ourselves in—struggling with this sense of me and mine, self and no self—can be experienced very simply as the result of clinging or grasping in the moment, or not.

I know that often when we begin to talk about anattā, which is usually translated as "no self," there's a kind of inward groan, or the mind thinks, "Okay, that's not for me," and checks out. "I can never know that." Or else the mind really starts working: "Okay, let's hear this. How can there be no me? If there's no me, who decided to come here? If there's no me, who's eating dinner?"

So what I want to do tonight is hopefully not talk about this as a philosophical point, but as an invitation into investigating our own moment-to-moment experience. A lot of times we get the sense, or people talk about, how "I have to destroy the ego, I have to get rid of my ego"—as if to understand anattā means we somehow change. But it's just as with impermanence. It's not that everything's been permanent and then when you understand impermanence suddenly everything's changing. That's how it already is. Things are changing. It's the same with anattā. Nothing changes except our perception, our point of view. It's already true. I hate to tell you this, but it's not like you have to destroy something that exists in order to discover anattā. It's already true. It's the way things are.

Realizing anattā doesn't mean you cease functioning. We're all functioning more or less fine. Actually, we probably function a little better once we stop referring everything back to this concoction of experience that we cling to and call self.

That said—and I'm sure the mind's still whirring away—I want to use the model that Ajahn Buddhadasa, this Thai forest master that I think we've referred to on this retreat, uses. Rather than getting into a big deconstruction model or trying to think our way out of it, just begin to tune in to when there's a sense of me and when there's not. He calls the moments when there's no big sense of me by the Pali word suññatā, usually translated as "emptiness," or in his translator's rendering, "voidness"—moments that are, as Steve said last night, empty of any separate self.

It's interesting because when Buddhadasa was writing about becoming content with voidness, he said that when he first started teaching back in the thirties and forties in Thailand, although anattā is really one of the three characteristics, one of the core teachings of the Buddha—liberation teachings, not teachings just for the heck of it, but teachings to liberate us from suffering—even so, in Thailand, which is a Buddhist country, anattā wasn't taught very much to lay people. When he started teaching it, the monks would say, "No, no, don't teach that to lay people. They can't understand it very well." That was the held belief. And he said, "Forget it. Of course people can understand it. This is one of the liberating teachings. What are we talking about, not teaching it?"

It's really much more simple. It can be approached experientially in a way that makes it much more simple than when we get so caught in thinking about it.

As Buddhadasa talks about it, the moment when there's no particular strong sense of me or mine, a moment of emptiness so to speak, is very normal and natural. It happens many, many times in one day. We look sometimes for bells and whistles, some ecstatic explosion into unitive experience that never goes away. And until we get that, we don't really notice little nothing-special moments that are empty of grasping or clinging to me or mine. Another reason we often don't notice these moments is simply because they are nothing special. Going along, taking a step—nothing. We don't think, "Wow, a moment of no self."

We just think... Nothing's happening now. When's lunch? When's the next interesting sensation going to arise? This is just pressure. Felt this one before. We don't really notice it so much.

And what we do notice, just as Steve was talking about last night, is all the concoctions and elaborations and memories and stories that come up around any particular sense experience. We're really entranced by that. As he said, we're really just making up a dream and living in it and reacting to it, because what's happening is just this. Just this. And the mind that's living in all the concoctions thinks it wants a little more. So it keeps on spinning out the concoctions and forgets to notice. Ah. Just this.

That's, I think, why Buddhadasa talks about really cultivating a contentment with emptiness, a contentment with voidness. That's a lot of what our mindfulness practice is taking us into. Experientially, what we can begin to do, rather than thinking about, analyzing, or philosophically trying to understand anatta, what we can begin to do, moment to moment, here in practice and also in our daily life, is to examine with mindfulness, with the wisdom of mindfulness, with truth-discerning awareness, at the point of contact, when we feel the presence of a sense of I or mine. In other words, rather than just standing on the side and waiting for it to go away, we begin to explore what we're taking for granted as an ongoing sense of me, I, always in the background.

Buddhadasa uses the Pali words, which I really like: ahankara and mamankara, which means I-ing and my-ing. These are experiences that come and go, unexamined. Of course it feels like I'm always here. Doesn't it? If you don't really look closely, doesn't it feel like you're always there, here in the background—seeing, thinking, talking, eating? It feels like me. Without really exploring it, I'd say it was

the same me that's always been here. And the more we think about it, the more solid it gets. How can I ever experience a sense of no self? I feel so solid. I'm never going to understand this. The more we think, that sense of I is getting stronger and stronger and stronger.

I used to feel like I was beating my head against a brick wall, and I would get into these internal torture sessions with myself about this. How can the sense of I not exist? It's clearly so strong. And of course, the more I was getting fixated on those thoughts, the stronger it got. What we need to do is turn around with our attention and explore the I-ing and my-ing itself, rather than assuming anything about that experience.

So when we turn around in a moment of I and my, what do we see? Now I'm going to tell you, of course, what I see, but I want you to look and see what you see, because my telling you won't do any good if you don't take that and turn around and look for yourself. So I really want this whole talk just to be an invitation for all of us to keep doing that, over and over and over, because it takes seeing it often.

This is Buddhadasa: "It's so simple. The sense of self is merely a condition that arises when there's grasping or clinging in the mind." That's it. That's it. Merely a condition that arises when there's grasping or clinging in the mind. We have a friend who puts it, "I want, I need, therefore I am." That's all.

This thing that feels so problematic and troublesome is a condition that arises and passes, not a steady state permanent experience. But it takes our truth-discerning awareness, our mindfulness right at the point of the sense of self arising, to see that it's a condition that comes and goes. The birth of self—it's born and dies many, many, many times in one day. Seeing that takes it out of the realm of some big steady state thing and it becomes just, oh yeah, another thing that comes and goes, just like that knee pain. Really, you don't have to get so reactive to it—or the knee pain either.

So this is a simple example, but it works. I was on a long retreat here at IMS. You know how the mugs are just all in that case there when you walk in. So I was on a retreat for a long time. I'd walk in, take a mug, get my tea, eat my meal—nothing. And after, I don't know, weeks, for some reason one morning the mug I took I'd never had before. And it just happened to be the perfect mug. I still can sort of remember this certain color green, and the grip was just right, and it just fit right on my mouth. And as I was drinking, I was appreciating what a perfect mug it was, and craving was born.

So first it's just craving. That's the beginning. There's contact, sense contact. It's pleasant. Craving arises. Sounds familiar?

Out of that craving, not really noticed, it strengthens into grasping. *Yes, this is a good mug. I want this mug other times.* And from being really quite present, just moment to moment, there was clearly the birth of me—me and my mug.

It was a very different experience from how things had been a few moments before. That was really a birth of self: me and my mug. And from what had been quite relaxed, just going along, there was suddenly

a sense of complication. *What do I do about this now?* We have a situation that needs to be dealt with—me and my mug. Things aren't just free-flowing anymore.

Well, I managed to notice all that and, with quite some pride, put the mug back on the dish cart and left it alone.

So that's an example of birth of self. But putting it back on the dish cart wasn't death of self, because there was still pride. *Aren't I doing a good job letting go of my mug?* The clinging had simply moved from the mug to the emotion of pride. That's all. But that's actually two different births of self, you see, and we don't notice that. It feels like one steady state.

So that's really birth of self. That's the whole dependent origination happening right there. Sense contact, pleasant, craving turning to grasping—which is what Buddhadasa calls the I-ing and my-ing. Both came up: I and mine. And then it moves into having and being. It strengthens into: *I'm a person who has this mug, and I want to continue to be a person who has this mug. What am I going to do about it?*

Seeing that the birth of self is simply that clinging and all the concoctions that come around it.

So I did. I put it back. I went away. But the next meal, things weren't quite so simple. You see the constriction that comes into the mind and heart with the sense of self, with the craving. I was aware that in a subtle, background kind of way, I wanted that mug. And I looked for it, and it was there, and I got it. It was all a little mellower than the day before, but I was really aware of thinking, *Okay, this time I'm going to hide it.* I know everybody hides mugs. I know all the tricks—I've been here a long time. You know how a mug disappears and you don't see it for the rest of the three-month course? Somebody's nabbed it. I knew I could do that. And there were plenty of mugs.

I was just watching it all. You know how you kid yourself—you're being mindful. *I'm watching all of this.* But I really was going to do it, until I truly saw the constriction, the suffering. It's mild—this is really small suffering. But this is the suffering of the contraction of "I," the clinging. And I really saw it. I said, *Ah. I get it. I don't need this.*

And that time I really put it down. And that was it. Birth, and then a moment of death of that particular self.

So that's what I mean by really beginning to notice—not with hatred. It helps to laugh at it.

It's just another arising experience. But when there's clinging and grasping in the mind, the sense of self arises. And notice—rather than fighting it, turn the attention back onto the experience I'm calling "me," or the experience of clinging itself. That's how I could notice the restricted quality of mind and heart. Where everything had been spacious and flowing, the world had suddenly shrunk to me, the mug, and everyone else who was the enemy who might get my mug. It's a very different experience from seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting. Spaciousness. So put it down, sense of "I" disappears—death of the self in that moment.

We all experience this birth and death of self many, many times in one day, don't we? But do we notice? We might notice the birth because there's that more or less subtle sense of clinging. Sometimes we just focus on the thing clung to and we don't notice the sense of "me" so much. Turn around and notice that. But we often may not notice that moment of the death of the sense of "me." Because again, it's just—ah, that's nice. Often it's quite neutral. Those moments where that sense of self has died, nothing particular going on—that's often that neutral moment that we don't notice. So instead of generating a recognition and contentment with emptiness of self in that moment, we're kind of sitting back and going, "Well, nothing much happened," and now we wait for the next arising experience. In other words, the next something that gives us a sense of self again.

So we don't often notice the death of the self, the sense of self, and those moments of just what is without the extra. If you're waiting for something to happen very subtly, notice that, and begin to notice when the clinging opens up and there's just pure presence again.

What we can explore in our practice—not thinking about it, but whenever there's a moment like I just described with that mug, or you don't even know what it's about but you suddenly become aware that "I" and "mine" is feeling very present... or as someone mentioned today, they're just noticing the sense of self more in their practice. Rather than making a big thing about it, turn the attention around. With the investigative light of mindfulness, explore whatever the experience is in that moment that I'm calling "me" or "mine," without preconceptions. Not like, "Oh my God, me again. I've got to get rid of this. I've got to figure out who I am." That's already—you're not there anymore. We're lost in thought. It's like, "Oh, self." Turn around and see what that note is labeling.

I mentioned in the group today, I was doing that a lot one time when I was practicing with Sayadaw U Pandita. It would be about every third note, there'd be sense of self, you know, and I'd just note it. And seeing that each time, it was actually a different experience. It's not the same. There is not a self sitting back there that we're turning around and noting. It's just some experience of grasping. And that's what I want to talk about—the different experiences we grasp at and often don't notice. That's where the sense of self comes from.

But anyway, I was sitting with Sayadaw, and in the interview you're just supposed to describe very specifically what's happening in your sitting, what you're noting. So I tried to describe this, how I'm noting sense of self. Well, it didn't really make it through the translation and through the way they look at things in any kind of clear way. They got hysterical, the translator and Sayadaw. "She thinks there's a self! She's noting the self! Every third note she's noting the self! Haven't you been practicing for years? Don't you know better than that?" That wasn't my most memorable interview.

Anyway, clinging and grasping, "I-ing" and "my-ing," is simply a habit. And we can begin to explore what's actually going on with that habit just by bringing mindfulness there when we recognize it.

So, talking about a few of the experiences—which we all know—and how the clinging to that experience

gives rise to the sense of "I" and "mine." The first one, obviously, is the body, our body. And what I have found most helpful—not thinking about it, but taking the attention and when we are having an experience of feeling we're clinging to our body—is to look with awareness and see: what's the actual experience that's happening right now that I'm calling "my body"? Because what I find, if you're just with the bare experience, say your knee's hurting, you know—"my knee, it's falling off, I need surgery, I'm going to the hospital." Okay, we know that's thoughts already.

You can come back to "my knee." But what's the actual experience? You're sitting there with your eyes closed, feeling sharpness. What are you actually calling "my knee" that you're so attached to? What's really happening in awareness at that particular moment?

I've noticed so often that I'll be sitting, there's sensation—pleasant, unpleasant, neutral, doesn't really matter—and there's almost like a visual, very subtle visual background. I don't know, I might be seeing my whole body. I might be imagining seeing my knee from the outside or from the inside, or not even that clear, but a subtle reference back to some almost pre-verbal, almost pre-image idea of my body. And it's not actually the sensation itself that I'm clinging to, but it's this overlay of subtle image that I'm calling "my body." So it's actually more attachment or clinging to an image or a sense or an idea.

Come back and look, in any moment, when you think, "Oh, my body, what am I going to do if I get sick? What if something happens to my kidney?" And you go down the whole thing. What's actually in that moment? Am I even connecting with my body? In that moment, for me, it's actually almost completely thought and emotion. "My body"—well, when I connect, there's nothing wrong with my kidney. I don't feel anything. That's just some idea going on. Or there's a simple unpleasant sensation.

And if you move just into the sensation, simply feeling it—twinging, burning, itching, whatever it is—how can we even think of that, if you're just with it? How can I think of that as Carol? I mean, it's not even female or male. Just sensation. Does it have an age, that sensation? Is it American? Has it gone through all the experiences I think Carol has gone through in my life? It's just an arising and passing sensation.

So it gets really interesting to come in. I might be clinging or having aversion to that sensation, but "my body"? It's a whole idea. Again, don't think about this. It won't help. Bring your attention into your actual physical experience and notice the difference.

For example, those really hot days, or today if you were hot, you notice the difference between, "Ah, I'm so hot. It's so hot. I'm just a rag. I'm all washed up. I can't function. I can't meditate. Ah, it's so hot." And just sensations you might call heat, or it might just be vibrating, or it might just be moisture. There's a huge difference. The sensations didn't really change in those two. The clinging and what we're clinging to is vastly different.

So next time you find yourself in some mode of "I am my body" or "I have this body" or "I'm saddled with this body"—I'm dragging this body through samsara—whatever way you're relating to your body, stop

and bring your attention to the actual experience, the material experience itself. This is where the mindfulness and the concentration are really helpful. Then see what thoughts, emotions, and storyline around those sensations you were confusing with the physical experience itself. Just notice that without preconceptions.

The concentration can be helpful because there are times when you can really experience your body, when you're sitting or walking, as sensations arising in space. There are times that people report in practice where the sense of body shape and form falls away. It's just the perception anyway, and the perception shifts. Sometimes that's scary for people because it's unfamiliar.

Sometimes it's pleasant for people. Sometimes it's nothing special. It's just a shift in perception. But experiencing that shift in perception from time to time is very helpful because it helps us see that this sense of solid form in space, unchanging, is just that—a different perception. It's not necessarily the true perception.

So one of the things that happens with our mindfulness, when we come to the bare experience free of all the papañca, is that we can begin to experience how things are underneath. Because the sense of lasting self is really just a misperception. That's all it is. When we begin to perceive in a different way, that sense of me doesn't have such a grip. That's really what's going on in this practice a lot of the time.

Many people report having experiences that are unfamiliar, accompanied by a little bit of fear. They'll look back and say, "I don't know why—the experience wasn't actually unpleasant, but somehow there was this fear." Just the fear of the unfamiliar, of a different perception.

So of course there's the clinging to body. Look and see what you're really clinging to, what you're calling body.

The second aspect of experience where clinging arises quite easily is this feeling tone—vedanā—pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. We've talked about this quite a bit. As we've said, we often don't notice the pleasant or unpleasant quality and get lost in our reaction to the experience. But with this clinging and the sense of self, I've found for myself that often in an experience there can be this clinging and the sense of me arising with the clinging, the contraction around the pleasant or unpleasant feeling tone. And you don't really notice it because we're more focused on what it is that's pleasant or unpleasant.

A simple example: when you have a good sitting. You know, the breath is just so nice and smooth, and you're so present with it, and the mindfulness is how you like it. And you're aware of it. So often it happens that we think, "Well, I know this is going to change." We're telling ourselves the whole time, "I know this is going to change. I'm not getting attached." Rising, falling, noting, noting. And often, of course, it changes. And of course, we find out that somehow we were attached because we're disappointed. It isn't quite so free-flowing.

Often the thing—not always, but sometimes—the thing we don't see is that we were noticing the

experience but not quite noticing the pleasant feeling and the attachment to it. So the sense of "I" becomes: I am not getting attached to this really nice, mindful sitting. And there's the clinging, the grasping, the "I" arising in response to my pleasant feeling.

So that's another one. And as I mentioned the other night, Buddhadasa says a lot about exploring the nature of pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral feeling because they're so ephemeral, so wave-like. If we really tune in and say, "Oh, this is such a great experience, my pleasant feeling"—well, when we look at it that way, the oomph goes out of it. "Oh yeah, my pleasant feeling. Now that one's gone. Oh yeah, my next pleasant feeling. Now that one's gone." We quit identifying with it so much, the identification just being that clinging.

Now, the next area—the whole area of the mind, thoughts, emotions, concoctions, the me-story—is obviously extremely complex. It's obviously an area where a great deal of the birth and death of the self is happening. And because it's so quick and complex, it's often unnoticed.

In fact, the Buddha once said—and I'm paraphrasing—he said that if you must identify with something, if you must think the self is something, better to identify with the body because at least that's changing more slowly than the mental stuff. The mind is going so quickly. The thoughts and emotions and the whole conglomeration of thoughts and emotions happening together—the formations, the stories—it's so easy for the sense of me to come in, and so easy not to notice the impermanent nature of that birth and death of self because they're just flowing one into the other and it can seem very continuous. The continuity is an illusion, but we often don't notice that.

So I'll just give some examples. Starting with emotions, just because it's easier to talk about an emotion—though I know they often come with thoughts and with our whole life story. But just to start with emotions, I've noticed for myself: first of all, we see in the sitting here how emotions just come and go and come and go. How many emotions have you been through on this retreat?

And still, there are certain emotions that when they come—we've seen them come and go a million times in our life—but certain emotions, when they come: this is it. This is really me. This is who I am. "I've felt like this all day. I've been so sad all day." Or the worthlessness went away for a little while, but really, that's the core of my being, and it's under there all the time, whether I'm aware of it or not. And now it's surfaced again.

So there's an assumption that we don't look at. Yes, it's always here.

I just don't always notice it, but it's always here.

So to begin with, you might notice which emotions can come and go quite fine. Anicca, yes, emotions are just clouds passing through the sky. And which ones are really grasped? Which ones really give birth to a sense of me and mine? My worthlessness, my sadness, my joy, my loving-kindness—whatever it is, we can grasp at it.

Notice when there's a sense, unexamined, that "I've felt like this all day" or "This has been going on the whole retreat." And even when it's really intense—I've noticed I could be in really intense grief coming up a lot during a day—there will be moments when it's just not there and I'm suddenly bored. Moments when, in the midst of the most ecstatic sitting, you're suddenly thinking, "Well, that's nice, but when's lunch going to be? I wonder what's happening for lunch today." Oh yes, I'm about to get enlightened, right? I forgot.

Just notice those moments when the continuity of this "me-emotion" isn't there. Noticing the gaps, noticing the coming and going, really helps to let go of the grasping that gives the sense of self. Or pushing away—it's the same, you know. Grasping for it to be gone creates the same sense of me and mine as grasping for it to stay.

And then you might notice that with certain emotions, there are times when the emotion is just there. Say sadness. It's not a problem. Then we might assume it's the presence of the emotion that interferes with peace, the presence of the emotion that makes me feel so solid. But there are plenty of times when sadness has been really just coming and going, and there's no particular grasping or reaction—it's no problem. But then suddenly it turns into *my* sadness. And there's a whole birth of self in that moment that feels very different—much more solid, much more problematic, much more sense of me and my sadness, my whole life history, what to do about it. Really no different from picking up that mug and getting attached.

And then there might be another moment where it's simply, "Oh, right, there's sadness." And that moment of pure mindfulness, when it's with an emotion, very clearly feeling it but nothing extra—that's also a moment of emptiness. There's no "I" manufactured around that emotion. So explore this stuff.

Now, the whole complex of emotions and thoughts and memories and projections—this happens so quickly, so quickly that from nothing to our whole life history can happen in a tenth of a second. It's really fascinating to watch it, to look.

I can remember one time I was doing walking meditation down in the gym. Just present, no sense of self particularly, just walking, really focused. And I just ran my finger under my turtleneck. That's all. Very mindfully ran my finger under my turtleneck. And because I was so present, I could notice this whole stream happening just like that. This is nothing special, right? There was no big pain, no big desire going on. I ran my finger under my turtleneck, had the physical sensation, an image flashed in my mind—a made-up image of what I looked like walking with my turtleneck and my finger under it. The thought came, some thought about slumpy yogi attire, how it gets about two months into the three-month course and we're all just slumping around in our sweatpants. A sense of self-image projected out, wondering what other people thought of me, and in that came a solid sense of me, around really that whole quick conglomerate of mental images, thoughts, and then memories. A feeling of contraction, feeling of clinging—ah, solidity of Carol.

It's fascinating to watch that happen. And admittedly, that's really subtle. We don't have to wait for it to be

so subtle, but we can explore how the mind does that.

One of the ways that the sense of self seems so strong and continuous is that, just in that moment I described, the story of Carol starts up—slumping along in the three-month course, and what do I look like, and how I looked in the past, and how I'm going to look in the future, and how the other yogis look. We're telling ourselves our self-story all day long. We forget to notice that the self-story is constantly changing in response to clinging to different experiences.

So one moment you're the slump yogi who's just wasting their time and not doing very well and not getting anywhere. And the next moment somebody goes running by looking really distracted, and you've suddenly become ace yogi, headed for Dharamsala to consult with the Dalai Lama. It's a whole different series of thoughts and emotions and sensations that are clung to. There's nothing the same about the two series except that sense of clinging and the calling it "I."

If you turn around and look, it's just clinging arising and falling, arising and falling, thoughts and emotions arising and falling. But we don't stop and say, "Well, there's the schlump me, and then there's the ace yogi me, and then there's the wise me, and then there's the..." And if we do do that, we start to think we're really going crazy. "Oh my God, there are so many me's in there!"

None of them are. They're just arising, clinging to specific conglomerations of thoughts and emotions. And if you can just notice that.

I have commentary, self-story going on in my mind a great part of the day. You might notice that too. I don't know if everyone has it, but it goes something like: "Now she's doing the dishes. Now she's scraping the dishes so mindfully. Now she clunked them down and made a loud noise. Now she's walking, lifting, moving." I mean, it's ridiculous. But if you see it, it's just a thought. It's just a thought. It does not have to be clung to. The biggest self-story going is just more thoughts and emotions coming and going. It doesn't have to be clung to. And then it's not self. It's just thoughts.

I'll give you an example. I think this was from the same retreat, I'm not sure, but I was sitting in my room. I'd been sitting for some weeks, just sitting and noticing what was happening. I coughed a little, and I was just noticing sensations—tickling, tickling, burning, burning, coughing, coughing. This went on for some time, nothing dramatic, just sensations coming and going.

And then this thought arose: "Oh, this feels like bronchitis," which I'd had a couple of times already that winter, quite seriously. That's the thought coming and going. Then the thought: "Oh my god, this feels like bronchitis." Really strong birth of self in that moment, attachment to that thought. And from that thought, immediately panic—total panic. "Oh my god, what am I going to do? I got so sick before. I can't... I have to leave in a week. I have to teach here. I have to go there. I have no time to have bronchitis. I cannot deal with this."

Total panic. And then I thought, okay, what's happening here? Tickle, tickle. Cough, cough. Thinking,

thinking. That's really all that was happening. And that whole panic completely went away. The whole sense of me—the death of the self again. Just sensations coming and going. Thoughts coming and going.

And I really saw that we have a choice where to let the mind dwell. What's so interesting is how often we choose to dwell on suffering. Because I saw that I could really just stay with the sensations and there was absolutely no problem. But my mind said, "Yeah, but bronchitis." And it would want to jump back there.

There's a line Ajahn Buddhadasa uses. He calls it "volunteering for suffering." And I thought, yes, my mind's volunteering for suffering here. I could stay with this, but no, what if it's bronchitis? Oh my god. And back into the panic.

I went back and forth, back and forth. It actually got fun because you could see it—birth of self, death of self, birth of self, death of self. And this, back to the barbershop question this morning, does not mean that if I'm not caught and clinging to "Oh my god, bronchitis"—just tickle, tickle, cough, cough—it doesn't mean I couldn't still tell if it was bronchitis.

Because actually it was. I could tell that and I could take appropriate action. All of that could happen without panic. Not the "oh my God, bronchitis, me, my past history, my future history, my whole life, what's going to happen?" Just staying with what is. The functioning just arises, doing what's obvious. It doesn't have to have all this clinging and self-story in it.

So that's an example of how quick and fast all the conglomerations of thought and feeling and memory and history and emotion can become so solid. But instead of trying to think your way out of it, you simply take your attention back to the feeling of panic, the feeling of clinging, that simple contraction itself. Don't try to think about "what am I calling self?" Turn attention to the contraction and just notice—oh yeah, grasping. It goes. Let it go. Nothing to hold on to there. It's really quite interesting.

A couple of other very subtle things we cling to that really feel like self, because they're so subtle. I just want to mention them, drop them in as something to explore in your practice. Again, please, if you notice your mind getting into a lot of thinking about it, just notice that we cling to that thinking. The sense of self gets strong and we think, "Well, of course this can't be true, because the more I think about it, the more solid I am, so that's baloney." Just notice that and come back to experience.

One is what we've talked about the last couple of days—the experience of intention. That intending to move, intending to eat a bite of food, intending to stand up. It's a subtle thing, often not noticed at all. And of course, unnoticed, if you say, "Who's standing up?" Well, I am. What kind of a stupid question is that? Who decided to come here? Who's eating?

When we can begin to have the mind quiet enough that we notice just that movement, that intention before scratching an itch, say, we can begin to see that the intention itself is a mental event that arises and passes. So you can really see the cause and effect nature of it, which takes it out of the realm of being "me."

To take a very simple example: itching when you're sitting. Unpleasant sensation gives rise to aversion. Aversion gives rise to the desire to move, to scratch the itch. It's all cause and effect. There's not some "me" in there, you know, all-seeing, having that intention. The intention arises as a result of causes. There might then be, also in that moment, mindfulness and wisdom that sees that intention and sort of has the intention not to act on it, so you don't. Another moment there's not mindfulness or wisdom, and you know how you've watched the intention ten times and suddenly you're scratching and you don't know how that happened? Or you're walking very thoroughly, very committedly, and suddenly you find yourself in the dining room having a cup of tea and you don't know how that happened. You were really committed to the walking meditation, but somehow here I am.

Intention arising unnoticed—and it feels like me. When we notice it, there's not necessarily any clinging. You can act or not, but there's not that identification, that clinging, that contraction around the intention.

Another, and this is even more subtle, is the mindfulness itself—the moments of consciousness themselves. That moment of knowing. We say the sound arises, and it's quite spontaneously known; the hearing happens. But if we think about it—well, who knows? Who? I know, obviously.

It's very easy, because the consciousness, the knowing, is so subtle. To notice that it arises and falls takes the mind to be quite quiet—even to notice consciousness at all, the mind needs to be a little quiet. So please don't try to puzzle this out. But in times when you're really aware of both the sensation and the knowing of it—if you're unconscious, the sensation can happen and we don't know it, right? If you're unconscious or asleep and there's a loud sound, you don't hear it.

So the knowing is that consciousness, that presence, that wakefulness. Prior to thought or verbalization, consciousness is simply the knowing of sound. It's not, "Oh, that's a robin calling."

That's more than consciousness. Consciousness is just that knowing quality.

When our mind is quiet, we can play with turning attention to that and begin to see also that it's not a steady state, and it's not me. But when we feel like we're noticing everything coming and going, coming and going, we're not clinging, we really feel like that—but still there's this subtle feeling of I-ing and my-ing somewhere in the background. Turn around and notice that sometimes what the contraction of self is around, what the clinging is around, is just that subtlety of knowing.

So whenever you notice the feeling of self, turn around with awareness, land on the feeling itself, the experience itself. It may be a physical kind of contraction—I feel it that way. It may be more subtle than that. But turn around and notice what it actually is in that moment, not thinking about it. And this is going to happen, this birth and death of I-ing and my-ing, many, many times in one day. There will also be many, many moments when there's not a sense of self.

So it's not so much that we have to take some dynamite and blast away this thing, self. It's more just beginning to see its impermanent, illusory nature—that a rapidly changing experience, actually many,

many different rapidly changing experiences, because of our lack of investigation and our misperception, we're taking for granted a continuity that is not there.

And so then when I feel now, and I feel like really solid Carol, it's just another experience coming and going. It's not, "Oh my God, I am so strong again! It's so humiliating, what am I going to do about it?" Okay, sense of self. Just another arising experience, just like anger, just like pain, just like hearing. And when you take away that kind of explosive reactive quality we can have around it, then we can actually explore it in a much more balanced and spacious way.

So the sense of self is merely an appearance that arises when there's grasping and clinging in the mind. And what follows on that, as the Buddha said, as Buddhadasa elaborates on, means that nothing is worth clinging to. I mean, we'll still cling, mind you, but nothing's worth it. That means nothing. That means not any of the things I've mentioned. It means not our mindfulness. It means not clinging to wisdom. It means not clinging to views of practice. It means not clinging to any idea whatsoever of who we think we are. It's the clinging itself that creates the separation, the sense of isolation, the misperception that keeps us in this wheel of suffering over and over.

What's also true is that in many moments, we all have that potential to recognize and generate that contentment with emptiness, that contentment with no sense of self. And it's important that we also begin not to overlook these times, to realize that, again, you don't have to wait until you're in some incredibly deep state of concentration. There are sometimes very strong experiences of emptiness that really can blast away a lot of our conditioning. That's true. But you don't have to wait for that, because the fact that there's no ongoing self is true now, every moment, no matter what your experience is. And we can begin to notice those moments when that's more evident.

As I said before, I think one of the reasons it's a little difficult to notice those moments is because there's so nothing special. We get more interested in things, and it's harder in a way to be open to the spaciousness of nothing special.

In fact, I've found the metaphor of space as a way to generate contentment with emptiness can be very helpful at times. This is from Ajahn Sumedho. He's talking about space. He's saying, is knowing the unconditioned, which is a word for nibbāna—is that very interesting or fascinating? You might think, "I'd like to know God or Dhamma. It's going to be an incredibly fascinating thing to know, something blissful and ecstatic." So you look in your meditation for that kind of experience. You think that getting high is getting close.

But he says the unconditioned is as interesting as the space in this room. Look at the space in this room. Is it very interesting to look at? It's not to me. The space in this room is like the space in the other room. The things in this room, the people in this room, may be good, bad, beautiful, ugly, interesting, uninteresting—but the space, what is it? There's nothing you can really say about it except that it's spacious.

And as there's nothing one can grasp in space, the only way one recognizes it is by not clinging to the objects in the room. That's what allows us to recognize the space. So when you let go, when you stop your absorptions, your judgments, your criticisms and evaluations of the people and the things in the room, you can begin to experience the space of it. But that takes a lot of patience and humility.

And I've noticed in my own practice at times almost a discomfort with spaciousness—spaciousness which simply means non-clinging.

I noticed one time I was doing a self-retreat somewhere in California, sitting outside with a very vast, spacious view. This is actually a nice way of inviting in that sense of spaciousness, just as we do with hearing meditation, where sounds are simply coming and going in space. There's not such a tendency to glom on.

So there was this spacious view. I was sitting with my eyes open, just being aware of space. And then I noticed there were four horses—teensy-tiny. I mean, I guess they were normal size, but they were in the distance. They looked teensy-tiny, way down in the back, moving around. You could hardly see them in proportion to the vastness of the view. But I would notice that my mind, my attention, would continually be drawn to those horses. What are they doing? Are they moving? Just fixated on the horses. And when I'd notice that, it was really a kind of grasping. Oh, right. And the next moment, the mindfulness would fall away and zoom—glommed back onto those little teensy horses.

I've often noticed a kind of uncomfortableness without this sense of relating, without this sense of fixating on something. Just as Ajahn Sumedho says, my conceptions and our points of view and all the things we think and say and do about each arising thing—just to let it be there in the space without attaching special significance to something was a little bit unsettling, a little bit uncomfortable. That's simply a habit of mind.

So playing with this sense of spaciousness, whether it's actually noticing space or being with hearing—spaciousness doesn't mean spaced out. It doesn't mean indifferent or disconnected. It's simply the quality of non-grasping. And you can be spacious and also be very precise. That's why space is only a metaphor. It's not an exact description.

If there's total, precise attention with anything—inside a sensation of breath, inside an emotion, inside what's happening—in that moment, isn't it true there's no reference back to anything else? There's just only the purity of that moment. There's no past, no future. There's no sense of anything else. That's also a quality of pure presence, non-clinging, very, very present, and nothing else. So in a way, it's total space as well, if you get a sense of what I mean. Just to let you know, it doesn't mean you have to only look at the sky and you can't notice what's happening. It's that quality of grasping, discomfort with nothingness, with emptiness. Just begin to notice that, play with the spaciousness.

So from Ajahn Sumedho, just to end: In your meditation now, as you incline towards the emptiness of the

mind, towards the spaciousness of the mind, just incline to stillness and not taking something up and making something of it. Just letting things be as they are. As you incline towards spaciousness, towards stillness, your habitual grasping, fascination, revulsions, fears, doubts, and worries—all of that stuff that we get so fascinated by about the conditions—lessens. You begin to recognize they're just things that come and go. They're not self, nothing to get excited about or depressed about. They are as they are. We can allow conditions to be just as they are because they come and go. Their nature is to go away, so we don't have to make them go away. We're free and patient enough to allow things to take their natural course. In this way, we liberate ourselves from struggle, strife, and the confusion of an ignorant mind that has to spend all its time evaluating and discriminating, trying to hold onto something, trying to get rid of something. Things are as they are. The experience of I-ing and my-ing is simply another condition that is as it is. Turn our attention to it rather than fighting with it, struggling with it, or avoiding it, and see that this too is simply a condition that arises and passes, nothing to take up and make something of.

And this leads us not into some kind of nihilistic life where nothing matters, but just the reverse. It allows for the depth of compassion and connectedness. Because really, all the suffering, all our wanting and fearing comes from this sense of an ongoing, unchanging self that I have to protect all the time.

So there's a lovely quote from Padampa Sangye: "Once you really understand emptiness, it would be absurd to do anything harmful. When you realize emptiness, compassion arises with it simultaneously."

Let's just sit quietly for a moment.

Thank you for your attention.

Thank you for your attention. Thank you for listening.

This concludes the talk.

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