The Tides of Conceiving

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 59:39

What I want to talk about tonight comes from a line in one of the suttas that I really love, where the Buddha speaks of "the tides of conceiving." He says, "When the tides of conceiving no longer sweep over a person, he is called a sage at peace."

When I read this, I could just feel that sense of conceiving, conceiving all the time—how exhausting it is. It really does wash over us like a tide. And when it's not clung to, one truly does feel at peace.

The Buddha defines conceiving as: "I am" is a conceiving. "I am this" is a conceiving. "I shall be" or "I shall not be," "I shall be possessed of form" or "I shall not be possessed of form"—and on and on, ad nauseum. You get the idea. That's conceiving, the tides of conceiving.

I want to pick up on a couple of topics from Sylvia's talk last night: the nature of insight, as well as how we can either stop and see, or we can sit and tell ourselves stories—which is basically the tides of conceiving.

So how do we see through, stop clinging to, these tides of conceiving? It's not about getting in a fight with thought—"I am, I am not this"—and trying to stop that. That's just more of the same. But how do we make that shift that recognizes reality in a whole different way?

This takes us into the nature of insight. Rather than a different way of thinking, it's a whole different way of perceiving. Insight is something that arises from who knows where. And the way it seems to work, or the effect it seems to have, is that we're suddenly perceiving our experience differently. It's not necessarily that the situation has changed, but the way we perceive and understand the situation may have changed radically.

The best metaphor I know for this—and I think it's really quite apt—is those Magic Eye graphic designs. You know the ones that come in books, with two or three different colors of graphics that don't have any particular design? They're kind of hard on the eye. But if you hold them and look at them long enough so that your gaze relaxes—a steady gaze, but relaxed, not looking for something—then the tendency of the eyes to grasp onto each of the graphic symbols sort of softens, and suddenly a 3D-looking image springs out from the middle of that page. Two guys playing hockey, or a rocket ship, or dinosaurs, or whatever it is. And it's really clear. It's the kind of "Oh! How could I not have seen this? It's so obviously here." And then when your eyes either get tired or you start looking too hard again, it goes away and the graphics are back.

This is, I think, a really good metaphor for how insight works, how our perception shifts. The 3D picture—it's always there, isn't it? Somehow hidden within the multicolored graphics. It's not that when

your eyes relaxed, something that wasn't there sprang out. It was already there. The perception just shifted.

And it doesn't mean that the original flat graphics with no particular picture is false either. They're both true. They're both part of that particular experience. Once we've seen the two guys playing hockey, even when we're not seeing it again—when we're only seeing the flatness—we know that is also part of it. And we don't have to get upset if someone comes and says, "No, I don't believe you." We don't have to get upset about it. We know it's true. But you can't give anyone else that experience either. All you can do is say, "Well, it's really true. And if you relax, or cross your eyes, or hold it to your nose, or whatever works for you, maybe you can see it." And maybe they can and maybe they can't. We can't affect it.

It's a little like the Buddha saying, "I can show you the path, but I can't walk it for you. This is really what is possible, but you have to try and see for yourself."

To me, insight is really like that. We learn to recognize the same situation in a different way. And even though that particular new way of recognizing may not last—have you noticed that? It's not like everything is altered solidly forever—the knowing of that new way of perceiving affects the mind stream. It has an effect on how we understand and how we respond to similar situations in the future. And it also makes it a little bit easier to perceive in this other way again.

from time to time, although not totally in our control, exerts an influence.

And I know we've all had experiences like this, or we wouldn't still be here plowing along. It can be quite simple. The experience of having a really strong pain in your knee—solid and unrelenting. You hate it, you just can't bear another sitting with it. What are they talking about, that pain is just sensations? It's clearly killing you.

And suddenly there's a sitting where something in the mind or heart lets go, and it's clearly intense vibrating sensations, but the sense of it as being pain, or *my* pain, or a problem, or solid—it's just gone. Gone. Just vibrating intensities, points of sensation. And it's really just like that for a while.

Then it goes back. The hockey players disappear and we're back to just the solid interlocking graphics. Where did they go? I want the points of intense, non-personal sensation back. But of course, as we know, clinging makes it impossible. Yet knowing that that was an experience, that that was a different perception of the same situation, changes something. Somewhere in our mindstream, in the way we approach our physical experience, there's a knowing that it can be different. It's not only one way.

It's not that either perception is the only truth. Sometimes our bodies feel solid. And if I go around saying, "I know it's nothing but arising and passing momentary sensations, just like bubbles arising and passing in emptiness"—I mean, it's been like that sometimes. It certainly doesn't feel like that right now, not in the least. But that doesn't make the other not true, and it doesn't mean this isn't true. They're just different perceptions.

So what starts to happen in the way we understand experience—the world, our mind, our body, all the five skandhas in practice—is rather than saying "this way I'm used to, solidity of body for example, is false, and what's really true is points of sensation in the night sky," we recognize that would be just letting go of one clinging and moving into another clinging. It's going to cause just as much suffering after a while. Rather, it's saying: Oh, sometimes the perception is like this, sometimes the perception is like that. And maybe those aren't the only ways perception can be. Maybe I have no clue, and maybe I never will.

But we hate that. We want to have a clue. We want to know what it's like. And that's where we get into trouble—wanting to know and holding on to our descriptions of reality because somehow it seems safer or more solid or more comfortable. Basically, it seems in control, right? Isn't that what it all comes down to? If I can really say and name and describe how it is, I've got it under control. Too bad it doesn't work.

So I want to remind you, to read again, a quotation from Sayadaw U Janaka that I mentioned in one of my earlier talks. Because the whole point of insight practice is these insights—which, rather than something we get or hold on to, are just shifts of perception.

U Janaka says that we practice vipassanā in order to live in happiness, to be rid of suffering. That suffering arises due to the suffering mental states we get involved in. That our suffering mental states arise because of *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*, because of our personality-view belief, our clinging to our idea of our personality. And that the *sakkāya-diṭṭhi* arises because we have a mistaken understanding of the nature of our mental and physical experience.

So again, we're back to the point—or a point—that the way mindfulness practice works is by allowing us, moment after moment, to perhaps have a little bit more accurate perception of our mental and physical experience. This can then give rise to maybe an understanding that's a little bit closer to what's really going on than the understandings and descriptions we might be operating under without even knowing it.

Let me backtrack a little and start with a discussion of the mental factor of perception itself. In Buddhist psychology, the word *perception* is a translation of the Pāli word *saññā*. It refers to a very specific experience.

We've talked about the sense doors—I think Guy was discussing this—that there's the eye, and when there's a sense object, a sight arises, and consciousness of that sight arises. When those three come together, that's called sense contact. Seeing, basically. And in a moment of sense contact, arising with it is *saññā*, or perception.

Perception is really based largely in memory. It's our basic, instantaneous recognition of what's going on, of what's happening. So with seeing, there might be the perception of a person, for example—a woman, or "that person I know," the person's name.

Or we hear a sound, and there's the immediate perception of the frogs croaking out there. This just pretty much arises on its own. And sometimes, of course, it's accurate. Sometimes we really don't know what the

sound is, and it might be perception just of not knowing. Sometimes the perception can be completely wrong. We hear a sound and think, "That's the frogs croaking," and it's not the frogs croaking at all—it's something else.

So that's one thing: there's perception, which may or may not be accurate. And then, as we all know by now, extremely rarely does it stop at perception. There's perception, and then out of that perception, just like that, there's thoughts, there's descriptions, there's interpretations. And in a moment of a simple perception, like a simple sound of the bell, the thoughts and interpretations and associations can create our whole world. Which is useful at times.

About fifteen minutes ago, when the bell rang outside, there was just that sound—gong—immediately the perception "bell ringing," and the association of the time: it means it's time for the talk, I'm a yogi, it's Spirit Rock on retreat, it's time to go in and have the talk, I know where I sit. All of that, the whole world springs into existence with the perception of that sound as the bell before the dharma talk. I mean, luckily it works a lot of the time. We all have similar associations and interpretations. It's useful. It's not like we want to get rid of that. We'd be a bit of a mess if we didn't have it: "What's that sound? What do I do now? Who am I? Where am I? What happened?" It wouldn't work.

So it's not like we're trying to throw that out. But it's helpful to see that it's not the absolute reality and truth of what's happening. It's an agreed-upon perception and description that's useful when we all know what's happening.

With our mindfulness, what we can begin to see is, first, that perception is not always accurate. And based on that inaccurate perception, descriptions and interpretations and assumptions can get really far afield. This is where we start to wonder why we're disconnected from things as they are.

An example of perception being inaccurate, distorted: in a moment of perception, that recognition is colored by whatever mental states happen to be arising in the mind, in the consciousness at that moment. The base distortion, of course, is ignorance—just not seeing clearly, not recognizing accurately. So hearing a sound, we don't really know. Have you noticed how our tendency is to make something up? The nearest thing, the closest thing.

For me, a good metaphor for inaccurate perception due to ignorance is if I take my glasses off and go around my house. I don't see very well without my glasses, and I can observe how the inaccurate perception then gives rise to mental states, associations, how we feel, and how it affects our whole state of being—based on something that isn't even true.

So if I go around without my glasses on—I really like the house to be clean and tidy—and when I don't have my glasses on and I walk around, I think, "Oh, everything looks really clean. I don't see any dust, I don't see any dirt. The windows look really clean, which is surprising since I haven't washed them in ten months. They look really good." And then I'll be reading or something, and I'll have my glasses on and

walk into the same room and go, "Oh my God. I didn't see. Look at that. Look at all those spider webs. Look at all that stuff on the floor." And then I'll get really disgruntled and unhappy, whereas before I was feeling really spacious and peaceful and in harmony.

Just based on perceptions and what we do with them. If craving is in the mind, have you noticed when you're really desiring something, it looks much more attractive than after you don't want it anymore? Not only people, but food or some idea. It really colors things. Or if there's fear.

On a retreat recently, I was in Asia, and it was mostly sunny and warm during the days, but I noticed a couple of days when it was really quite cloudy—a very different atmosphere. The first day it was like that, I had been in a space where a lot of deep fear was coming up. Then I went outside to do my walking and it was cloudy, and immediately I felt that it was sinister. It felt unsafe. It's so cloudy, it's so dark, it's so sinister. I don't feel safe walking out here. I could see, oh wow, that's just the fear completely coloring the perception.

Then the next time it was cloudy, I was in a much more peaceful place, and I went outside and thought, oh, it's kind of cozy. It feels like a blanket, you know, the higher barometric pressure, and it makes all the sounds—of which there were many—much more muffled. This is really pleasant. This is really cozy.

We do that a lot. A lot.

Now, if we're aware of how the mental states in the mind are coloring the perception, and then how the mind is taking that perception and running with it into all the associations and feelings that grow from it, then that's fine. We can just see that's what's happening. Sort of like seeing, oh yeah, there's these hockey players, or there's not. When we don't realize that's what's happening—which is when we're telling ourselves stories and our energy is caught in those stories—that's when we really start suffering. Because mostly we end up trying to fix it or manipulate things to keep it the way we like it, when it's not even that way to begin with. We're just making it up.

That's my favorite line of Joseph Goldstein's: we're making it all up. Moment after moment, really quite literally, we're making it all up. Sometimes it's quite useful. But when we're really suffering, it's helpful to know that we're making it up. Because if we can start to see through how we're making it up, we don't have to keep believing it. And then we don't have to keep suffering from a story that we're making up—based fifty percent of the time, I haven't done a research paper that it's really fifty percent, I'm making that up too—on a perception that isn't even accurate to begin with.

It's really a trip when we start to look at it this way.

There's a great word for this particular pattern in the Pali: *papañca*, one of my favorites. This is the definition of it: What one perceives, one thinks about. What one thinks about, one complicates. One complicates with associations, with memories, with ideas. And then this complication, this proliferation, becomes notions that assail and overwhelm a person—just based on the complications of thinking about

any particular perception of sense experience.

The Dalai Lama said once that all of our difficulties stem from mistaken perception. That's quite a statement. All of our difficulties stem from mistaken perception. That's why there's so much emphasis on direct experience or true knowledge.

So as I said, even having a perception and using it to describe the world doesn't have to be a problem. It's useful. Even having a perception and a description that we're not sure is accurate—that's okay. The problem is only when we're clinging to, identified with, that perception, that description, that interpretation. And mostly we don't know we're doing it. So when we think, "This is true, this is how it is," that's a clue that we're grasping or identifying with it. And that's when we start to get into conflict with ourselves, with others.

Because once we're locked into "this is what that sound is, this is what this sensation means, this is what's happening," it's as if our awareness snaps shut. We tend, out of kind of solidifying around this description of the world or ourselves, not to even notice perceptions or experiences that go against the particular description we have. It's actually amazing, I find, how the mind can do that—just completely discount perceptions that don't fit into our description, even when our description is a suffering one.

On retreats, I don't know if this has ever happened to you, it happens to me sometimes. Those of you who've been here two weeks, by now I know even in the silence, you kind of have a sense of who everyone is by the way they walk or the feel of them. You know people's routines. You always run into the same person at a certain place.

And have you ever had it happen, as I have, say in the dining room of the Insight Meditation Society—the dining room's a bit bigger—where I'll be sitting down eating, deep in retreat, and someone comes and sits near me. I don't look up. I'm just really being a good yogi. You're dying to look, but you don't look. But you know who it is anyway. You can feel it—how they sit and how they move—and so you know who it is. And from that perception of who it is, whatever associations go with it, just like that, they're there. You like the person, all those things. You don't like the person, all those things. They're eating like a slob, all those things. And you just know it.

So I remember one time I was deep in that, noting, noting, noting. But it's all going on. There's not even a flicker of a doubt that I know what's happening—until I looked up and way at the far end, the person who I knew was sitting next to me happened to walk by. And everything just comes crashing down. I watched the mind's tendency to go, "Well, that can't be them because they're here." I love that because it just makes the whole house of cards fall down. And just for a moment, I'm in that space of don't know. Just open to be present without having to know everything, without assuming already before I've even met the moment.

There's a German joke a German friend told me. Sometimes at night, if someone's out driving and has probably had a few too many beers, they can tend to get onto the Autobahn, the freeway, going the wrong

way. You enter the wrong exit and you're going in the wrong direction on the freeway at night. And in Germany, that means fast in the wrong direction on the freeway. They call it, translated, a ghost driver. And when there's a ghost driver going the wrong way, sometimes it'll come on the radio: "Ghost driver at this location on the Autobahn between these two cities." And so the joke my friend told me is that the ghost driver, the person driving, is listening to the radio hearing there's a ghost driver on the Autobahn. He goes, "One ghost driver? There are many."

We so hold on to our perception, we just don't even question it. They're all going the wrong way because I'm right, no question about it.

So when we're grasping like that, it freezes perception. It really solidifies our thoughts. This is when thoughts become so solid, so real, and we're really suffering from a thought because we've really solidified our perception and our description at that point. It's basically clinging.

When there's just that shift—oh, it can't be this person because there they are—in that moment everything is open to be perceived, to be experienced in a different way. Then in that moment of not knowing, there's not really conflict. It's not a problem. It opens us up to that moment of insight where we can really just let a different way of being, of understanding, of perceiving come in. When we're so locked into how we think it is, there's no room for letting go, for that shift to come in.

So it's not that thoughts are a problem. Thoughts are really useful. Descriptions are really useful. We use them all the time. There's nothing wrong with thoughts. It's just learning to understand that they're simply tools, and they are rarely accurate descriptions of ultimate reality. And as long as we know they're tools, there's always that possibility that our description, our interpretation, isn't the only one—or even the only right, accurate one. Just that possibility that there's another way.

This is Ajahn Chah. He says, talking about how we use thoughts to construct reality, our idea of reality: "Appearances are determined into existence. Why must we determine them? Because they don't intrinsically exist. For example, suppose somebody wants to make a marker. They take a piece of wood or a rock, you place it on the ground, and you call it a marker."

Actually, it's not a marker. There isn't any marker. That's why we determine it into existence. You put it there, call it a marker, and now it's a marker.

And he says, in the same way we determine cities, we determine people, we determine cattle—we determine everything. Why must we determine these things? Because nothing originally, intrinsically exists as that. It's our way of using thought to determine it into reality, all our concepts.

Understanding that these things are simply determinations—including people, including cities—understanding that they're simply determinations, you can be at peace. It's not a problem. It's useful. But if you believe that the person, the being, the mind, the "theirs" and so on are intrinsic, self-existing realities, then you laugh and cry over them. Then there are the proliferations of conditioning

factors. If we take such things to be ours, there will always be suffering. This is micchādiṭṭhi, wrong view. But when we stop clinging to them, there is peace. They don't have to go away. We just realize it's a determination. It's not how it ultimately actually is. And in that realization, there can be peace.

In my experience, personally, I've found that it's really this search of the heart, the mind, that wants some kind of resting place. Some place where it doesn't have to hang out in that "don't know," that undetermined space where "this isn't possibly the only way." The mind wants some sense of "this is how it is—I know how it is, don't tell me otherwise." And it feels secure and safe, somehow at ease, even though that very grasping is the source of so much conflict and suffering.

I want to talk a little bit about this selective perception, because it's really amazing to me how, once the mind has landed on "this is how it is"—this description, this is a marker, this marks the boundary between my property and yours—if you move it over two feet, there's big trouble. Moving that stone from here to there creates huge conflict.

How we don't notice or accept conflicting perceptions can really bring us into conflict with ourselves and with others. For example, I remember in politics years ago—way back in the seventies with Nixon. He was, you know, the worst politician ever. And I can't remember what exactly, but I remember hearing something really positive about him, something really good he'd done. I saw my mind respond: "I don't want to hear that. There can't be anything good about Nixon because he's in this category in my mind." It's too confusing to have it open—that maybe he was a real jerk in this way, but there were also these really beautiful things. The mind doesn't like hanging out like that. We hold fast. We don't want to let go of our solid worldview.

One great place to notice this, since you're here on retreat, is to observe how your perceptions of what's happening in a particular sitting or in a particular walking shape your experience. Notice the perception, how you interpret it, what emotions and reactions and self-descriptions come out of that interpretation, all colored by whatever mood happens to be in your mind at the moment. Notice how the view of what "good practice" is gets really locked in, and how much conflict we can create with our own experience just from holding to that description, that view of good practice.

Teachers are in a really fortunate position, getting to hear so many different people, because it becomes so obvious how we each just make it up—usually to our own detriment. Usually "good practice" is something other than what's happening in my experience right now.

We'll have a string of people come through. One person will say, "Well, my practice is no good because I can't stay with anything. As soon as I feel a sensation, something else happens. As soon as I notice a thought, it goes away. I have no concentration—I can't stay with the thoughts." And we'll say, "Well, could it be that things are coming and going quickly, and that's impermanence?" "No, it couldn't be. I have no concentration."

The next person comes in, and they're just with the breath, very peaceful and soft and present. But they're saying, "You've been talking about choiceless awareness, and I should be able to open to all things coming and going, and that's not happening. It's just the breath, just really peaceful, just really quiet—which just shows that I'm dull and don't really have insight into impermanence."

Then the next person wants a lot of emotions because they're too peaceful. And the person having a lot of emotions thinks that's a waste—it's not about opening to emotions, it's about being peaceful. And on and on it goes. All of it is probably stuff that's been said here, or that you've read, or offered in response to questions. All of it.

So notice how your mind will tend to pick out the one usually that will cause us the most trouble. Because we tend to have the overview of "I'm not good enough." If you have the overview of "I'm really the best," then you'll pick out the one that confirms exactly what's happening to you and ignore the others. And that happens too. "I'm having some kind of energy release and that's the most important thing." Everything else is ignored. We all do this. It's amazing.

Once I was teaching a retreat many years ago, and I was still sitting in a chair then as I do now. Well into the retreat, like the fifth or sixth day, someone came for an interview. It was her first retreat, and she said, "You know, I've been in so much agony sitting on the zafu. My body isn't used to sitting cross-legged." She was just in agony for days. That's all her sittings were about—the agony and berating herself that she couldn't do it right. And she said, just before the interview, "But you know what? Just today I looked up and I said, 'Oh, Carol's sitting in a chair. Maybe it's possible to meditate sitting in a chair.'"

Now, we had said that. Did any of us ever say you have to sit cross-legged on a zafu or you're not meditating correctly? And we didn't say it then either. Five days of not being able to let in that perception because of the mind saying the only way to do it right is to sit on the zafu cross-legged. It's amazing what we can do.

So notice how you do it with your practice. Selective perception filtered through mental state and memory—what you remember, what you don't remember, and how we suffer from trying to make our experience match or stay with a description we've basically, essentially made up.

Another place that we do this—and it's very subtle at the same time that it's so grossly obvious it's amazing we miss it, but then it's also very subtle because it's happening so fast—is in the whole realm of sakkāya-diṭṭhi, of personality view. Personality view being—it's not one solid steady-state thing—but our basic beliefs and descriptions about ourselves. Either our personality traits, the way we define ourselves, the way we relate to certain moods and habits of mind, our view of ourselves, our memories. So familiar, so unnoticed, but it's really the veil through which we filter a lot of perceptions.

A lot of people have been mentioning this in interviews, not in these words exactly, but seeing, for example, how maybe we knew it before intellectually, but noticing it more moment to moment as it's

arising. How maybe somewhere way, way back in childhood or infancy, there was some perception of great neediness, or of somehow doing something that made mother's love go away and perceiving it as "I'm completely unlovable," or "Somehow it's my fault and I have to make my parents happy." You know, whatever. All our stories, which in some way are both trite when you say them but really very profound and suffering-causing in our lives.

But really seeing how, based on whatever perception—maybe back in infancy—that perception and that interpretation, "I have to do X, Y, and Z to make the world safe for me to live in, to get love from my parents," or "I have to make myself invisible not to get anger coming from my parents," whatever it is—it might be based on an accurate perception at that time. That's not the point. That particular perception and the descriptions, the interpretations, the sense of self that comes out of it, then continues to become so ingrained, really so identified with, so clung to, that through the veil of it—we don't even see it—that becomes the way that we respond to many, many situations in our life, up to and including now, when it's not really applicable at all.

Well, a lot of us know this from therapy, and we wonder, why did that perception stay so solid? It's not as if I'm carrying around something on my back that I have to chip away at. But what we start to see through the practice here is that, simply without recognizing that particular clung-to description, we're recreating those conditions moment to moment by the way we respond to situations.

So for example, if somehow I grew up feeling that people were always pulling on me, and people were always needing me, and I somehow had to protect myself—then in some really minor situation, even here, where nobody's needing anything, but we just see someone coming toward us, and instinctively we turn away. "Oh, don't let them look at me, they're needing something from me." And we go off and we've shrunk away into ourselves, and there's a sense of separation. Just something so quick as that, and relatively minor. And then we start saying, "I feel so separate, I feel so isolated, I feel so alone."

It's sakkāya-diṭṭhi. It's not that we even have to get rid of that, but simply recognizing how in that moment, that interpretation of the perception—say, I'm making this very simple—of someone coming toward me, "Oh, they're going to need something"—total interpretation. We don't know. It's based on the view we don't even recognize that we're clinging to, and we pull back.

All we have to do is be aware of that whole process without clinging to it, without assuming it's an accurate description. And hating it is also clinging to it. So saying, "This is really bad, I have to change it. I have to be open-hearted, loving, and kind. I will go toward whoever comes near me"—

I will offer them something. That's just more of the same, only turned around in the other direction.

This is what's so great about the shift of perception that insight brings. You don't have to unpack it all. We just have to see through it. Thoughts are fine. Just because a thought arises, we don't have to make it so solid. We don't have to make it a solid reality. We don't have to fight it. We can simply see: oh, this is the

perception, this is the interpretation, this is sakkāya-diṭṭhi. Anxiety feels like this. Fear of being needed feels like this. Loneliness feels like this. That's all. I mean, it's a lot. But that's all. It's a shift of perception, not tearing everything apart and starting over. Just recognizing that maybe this isn't the only description of the world that's possible.

It really is quite amazing.

This is from Bankei, a Japanese Zen master in the 1600s. He's talking basically about how our problem with thoughts, our coming into conflict in regards to our thoughts, is that we have so much preference for ourselves. He says that if you didn't have this preference for yourself, there wouldn't be any illusions. If two people next to you were quarreling, you can just listen to it and be quite balanced about it. We don't get all drawn in or upset about it. But as soon as we're one of the people quarreling, it takes on a whole other level of intensity and seriousness.

So he's basically saying all of our thoughts are as if two other people are quarreling or having some great discussion. We don't have to meet them any more than that.

And he says, even when memories arise, things about your past, reflections of your past and images—those will arise. That's just normal. But these thoughts don't really have a real substance. So when they arise, just let them arise. You don't have to make them stop. But if they do stop, let them stop. And either way, you don't have to pay any attention to them.

Can we stand that? All these thoughts and memories—I'm like this and I'm like that, and this happened because of this—just don't pay any attention to them. Don't try to stop them. Don't try to keep them going. Don't pay any attention. Just leave them alone and then all these illusions don't appear.

And since there are no illusions when you don't take note of the reflecting images, while these images, these memories are reflected in the mind, it's just the same as if they weren't reflected in the mind. You get what he means? They can be there or not. It's just the same. A thousand thoughts may arise and it's just the same as though they haven't. They won't give you a bit of trouble. You don't have any thoughts that you need to clear from your mind. You don't have to cut them off. They can arise or not arise. It doesn't make any difference.

Can we imagine that? That's just a thought. It's just passing by like a sound. It just doesn't have to make any difference.

Thoughts are only so solid when there's this clutching, this grasping of interpretation, description, and identity around them. Now, I'm not saying that's easy. But that's our whole practice. How do we cut through that?

Back to the absolute simplicity of sati, of mindfulness, of what Ajahn Buddhadasa calls sati-pañña—sati is mindfulness, pañña is wisdom—at the moment of sense contact, at the sense doors. It's another way that

sense restraint, which was brought up this morning, is talked about sometimes. Not the sense restraint that means you never look around or you don't go out looking for distraction. That's one meaning of it. But sense restraint in terms of bringing mindfulness-wisdom, clear seeing, the simplicity of presence to that moment of sense contact, to the moment of perception. Just noticing what's happening as it is. Sound. The perception "bell." And that's enough. Even if a thought comes—"Oh, that bell means blah-di-di-blah-blah"—thinking. You know it's a thought. You don't have to stop it. But that's all. Not having to create whole worlds around it. Not having to believe it. Not having to do anything. It's so simple. I don't know. We just can't stand it somehow.

But this is really the heart of the famous sutta called the Bāhiya Sutta, where someone came to the Buddha begging him to just quickly tell him basically what he needed to know so he could become an arahant, completely enlightened. He was begging the Buddha, and the Buddha was saying, "I'm going on alms round now, I'll tell you later. This is not the right time." But Bāhiya was very impatient. He said, "No, you've got to tell me. You've got to tell me now." And three times Bāhiya begged the Buddha. Classically, on the third time, the Buddha would acquiesce, unless it was something he would never agree to. So he said, "Okay, I'll just give you this one little stanza."

It's this famous stanza where he says: "In the seen is only the seen. In the heard there is only the heard. In the cognized there is only the cognized. In the sensed there is only the sensed. That is all." In other words, you hear the sound, that's it. All the rest is extra—papañca. The notions that assail and overwhelm a person, complications, completely extra. It's so simple, but we're so unused to it that we really have to practice. Because it's so quick, isn't it, from one sound, one thought? A thought is just another sense experience, just like a sound or a smell or a taste. It's so quick from the sense contact to getting lost in all that proliferation that we just have to learn to come back again, come back again to the simplicity of that sense contact.

And then moment after moment, the continuity is what starts to really show us that what we thought were accurate descriptions and interpretations are actually not steady state at all—constantly changing. These interpretations about ourselves, for example, the sense of the solidity of "me," which is what sakkāya-diṭṭhi is based on. If we didn't have some sense of me being here, we wouldn't be interpreting all experience in terms of what it means about my personality. But when we're willing to just stay that simple, at the point of sense contact—bringing mindfulness as the presence, wisdom as the paññā that is just not going off into interpretation, just staying here—moment after moment, the continuity between the sitting and the walking and the movements through the day, the continuity is what begins to reveal the discontinuity of all our interpretations of reality. None of it really holds up for very long if we stay steady.

Again, I'm making these very pretty simple examples, but just look in your own experience. The sense of self and our sense of personality view, who we are—we all have a kind of basic one, you know. But say you happen to be walking and you're feeling it's going really well.

You're focused. It feels good. Let's face it, that's what "going really well" usually means—it feels good. So for whatever reason, it feels good. And someone comes by that you had previously been comparing yourself to in an unfavorable way. They're going in a hurry and they go into the dorm. But it's just the beginning of the walking period. And you think, "Huh, they're goofing off. And I'm really doing it."

From that feeling good, that perception which was basically just seeing, the comparing of me and them arises, the whole story about what they're doing—when actually we don't have a clue what they're doing. And all our sense of feeling good, what comes into that through selective perception, will be all our memories of when we were great, all our projections into the future of how great we're going to be, how good we felt in the past, how good we'll feel in the future. And that feels like me, really solid.

Then it could be five minutes later, two seconds later, or the next walking period, and it doesn't feel good anymore. In fact, it feels really lousy. You're thinking a lot, and somehow you go into the dorm. And then you realize that that person who you thought was goofing off went in because they're actually sitting much longer in their room. They're sitting three hours at a time. While you're the one who's schlepping along, not even able to lift your foot and feel two feet in a row.

And then the whole thing switches. The only memories that seem at all real are all the times you screwed up. And if you remember those times you were so great from the last walking period, well, that's baloney—that was a fluke, that doesn't count. This is really the heart of who I am, this loser. And not only that, I project onto other people my loser-ness, going around making everybody else bad. That's really me. That's true. That's an accurate perception based on real memories, and it's solid, solid thought.

And neither of them is true. Yet it feels like continuous me somehow. I don't know how we overlook the fact that it's completely different stories and completely different moments. "Yeah, that's continuous me. I'm just one solid thing. This is what I'm like." And we do this all day.

What's amazing is we can take any sense contact, any sense contact, and construct this. You hear the frogs. You can make up the whole story of your life. Back to summer camp in third grade and how everyone was mean to you, those frogs croaking by the lake, and on and on. Or the reverse. Play with it.

I used to do this on retreat. I'd do it with crickets, because crickets brought up a certain nostalgic quality when I wasn't paying attention. I'd get into a whole story. The crickets. It's so sad. Fall is coming. The ending of all life. I could die in this room. No one would know for three days. And all the moods that go with it and the solid sense of me.

Really?

And I caught it one time. I said, okay, let's just change it. I thought, really tune into the sound of the crickets and think, "Isn't that beautiful? So present, so immediate." My mind's going, "Yeah, right. So present in nature."

And within about two seconds, the relevant feelings started to arise. It was amazing. A sense of happiness, a sense of oneness with nature. I'm so lucky to have this time to practice.

It was just as real as the one before. This was within a two-minute period. They were both equally real or equally unreal, equally having anything to do with who I am—which is like nothing. We're making it all up, literally.

So just notice how any sense—a sound, a smell, somebody slurping their soup next to you—can immediately become the whole story of your life. Me, me, me. What it means about me, and all the past and the future and selective perception. It's totally amazing.

If we can just watch that without having to then jump into "I'm so stupid, I'm so wrong, I'm so unenlightened"—because that's just another one. You just sit back and watch and go, wow, this is really amazing. And we move into the space of awareness rather than being gripped by the reactions and interpretations and the story, and it stops really being a problem. It really stops being a problem.

It's so simple. Oh, hearing. Slurping. That's all. Unpleasant, pleasant, whatever. We don't have to make up anything about it. We don't have to create a whole world of thought.

It's not that we have to get rid of our personality view. It's not that we have to somehow figure out a way to think about there being no intrinsic unchanging self and think our way out of it. We just have to step outside of the box. Oh, personality view is like this. Nothing changes, but our whole perception changes. It's really this sense of peace that just arises from not getting so involved in the papañca, in the proliferations. Just the silence.

The Buddha said once that the end of papañca is the end of conflict. And it's really true. On my last retreat, when I was sitting for a few weeks, that teaching kept going through my mind because I was just seeing how, when the mind was in a state of seeing impermanence and loss—like that with the weather—I would go out on a cloudy day and it would feel completely oppressive and scary. And I could see the mind creating that, although one still feels it.

And then I remember one day—you can do this with anything, right? I went outside. I was pretty focused, pretty concentrated and calm, and there were two butterflies just playing together. And it was as if I could see, without the thoughts actually arising, I could sense all the stories the mind could go into—both on the beautiful side and on the side of "everything's dying anyway." Just everywhere the mind could go with that. But it didn't. It just didn't.

And there was a sense of just seeing, seeing, and silence. Nothing else needed to arise around it. And I still remember it because it was such a tangible experience of peace. No big deal. Just the peace of not having to create a self-story about every little thing that happens. Just seeing and silence.

The silence is always here. We could pay attention to the silence instead of all the thoughts. The thoughts

don't have to stop—that's what Bankei was saying. We just don't have to pay so much attention to them. When we begin to notice how we pay attention to them—because they come so loud, associated with emotion, based on believing the description and perception—when we can notice that and just allow the possibility that maybe it's not the way I think, then we can start to notice the space, or the silence. We don't have to figure the thoughts out. Just let them run out and tune into the silence. And everything changes. Everything changes.

I just want to end with a little bit from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche about thoughts:

"It is our own mind that can lead us astray into the cycle of existences. Blind to the mind's true nature, we hold fast to our thoughts, which are nothing but manifestations of that true nature. But holding fast to the thoughts freezes awareness into solid concepts such as 'I' and 'other,' desirable and detestable, and plenty of others. This is how we create samsara. But if, instead of letting our thoughts solidify, we recognize their emptiness, then each thought that arises and disappears in the mind renders the realization of emptiness ever clearer."

Not only are thoughts not a problem, watching them arise and disappear actually strengthens our recognition of emptiness.

"All phenomena of samsara and nirvana arise like a rainbow, and like a rainbow they are devoid of any tangible existence. Once you have recognized the true nature of reality, which is both empty and at the same time appears as the phenomenal world, your mind will cease to be under the power of delusion."

So in our practice we just maintain that state of simplicity.

So let us just sit quietly for a moment.

Bell

Thank you for listening. Please check the notice board this evening for tomorrow morning's interview schedule.

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