Sakkāya-diṭṭhi: Identity View

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:05:21

I want to talk about Sakkāya-diṭṭhi, which is translated variously as personality view or identity view. That's how Bhikkhu Bodhi likes to translate it. Using a lot of information from the discourses, from the suttas, I found myself completely absorbed in reading many different texts—I hope I don't get too detailed about it, but I was having fun with the exploration.

Sakkāya-diṭṭhi, personality view, is essentially getting caught in that sense of self. Once I went to some teachings of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and in my notes I recorded him saying that there are two attitudes at the core of our suffering, like twin forces at the core of our being. These attitudes are grasping at self-existence and the self-cherishing attitude—basically, the meanness of things. He said we've entrusted our entire well-being to the self-cherishing attitude, and so we find ourselves caught in a perpetual cycle of suffering due to this erroneous total belief that self-grasping can make us happy. Later he observed that if this really worked, if self-interested thought and activity could make us truly happy, we should all have succeeded by now, because we've certainly perfected that quality of activity.

So what is this Sakkāya-diṭṭhi? There's one sutta in the Saṃyutta Nikāya where it's said that all the sixty-two speculative views—there's an entire sutta outlining the different views and all the ways we get lost in past and future and questions of existence—arise from a single source. Someone asks what causes these views to come into existence, and in the absence of what do they not arise. The key, of course, is identity view. When identity view is present, then all of these sixty-two speculative views can come to be. When there is no identity view, no personality belief, no Sakkāya-diṭṭhi, then these views don't come to be. They don't arise.

This Sakkāya-diṭṭhi is definitely a seed of enormous confusion and suffering. After we've been practicing for a while, to move away from such elevated language, we hate it. We want it to go away—but not really. We'd like the suffering part of it to go away, but other parts of it we're so familiar with. It just feels so much like me. How could it go away?

Back to the suttas. What is this Sakkāya-diṭṭhi? The Buddha actually describes it very precisely. He has very different words and phrases for different aspects of how the sense of self is created in a moment. Sakkāya-diṭṭhi is, in some ways, the grossest form of how we get caught in creating a sense of self, but it's also the place to start. He gives a very specific definition of what Sakkāya-diṭṭhi is.

Now experientially, before I share that definition, we all know very well the experience of being caught in identification. Both the experience of being caught and the mystery of it. When you're caught in some particular internal formation, a particular pattern of your mind, an emotional train, some reaction, or

maybe just striving in meditation—something you're caught in—and you're mindful to the extent that you can actually name what's going on. You can say, "Oh, this is striving," or "This is my sense of worthlessness." You can note the sensations, identify the emotions. It's not like you're lost on another planet or completely believing the content. And still, somewhere, you're totally identified. You sort of know that in the back of your mind, but you just can't see how.

And then it switches. Something lets go and suddenly there's no identification anymore. The whole saṅkhāra, the whole formation might still be there, might still be exactly the same, but somehow you're free within it. There's just not that sense of suffering from it anymore. And it's a mystery, isn't it? You wonder, "How did that happen? What let go? Can I do that again?" Just that sense of something huge having shifted, and at the same time, you're still in the same story, but it just isn't me anymore. We know that experience.

You know that experience.

But what does the Buddha describe sakkāya-diṭṭhi as? What is it? How does the presence of sakkāya-diṭṭhi serve to create further views, further getting lost in a sense of self? How do we practice sakkāya-diṭṭhi? Because we do, often. And what is the path of practice leading to the cessation of self-identification?

I just want to touch on some different suttas, some different things the Buddha has said about each of these.

There is one very set definition of sakkāya-diṭṭhi. In the past, I would read it and kind of not dismiss it, but just try to simplify it and think, "Oh, that's too complicated and boring." But I'm afraid I don't think that at the moment, so you're going to get it—the whole thing.

This is Sāriputta speaking, but that's also pretty good. And this is repeated over and over in the suttas; it's not just a one-time thing.

He says: What is sakkāya-diṭṭhi? An uninstructed worldling—someone who's not completely awakened—regards form as self, or regards self as possessing form, or regards form as within self, or regards self as within form.

A metaphor is given for each of these, because I know the mind just goes, "Huh?"

Regarding form as self: the metaphor is that in that moment, they're indistinguishable, the way that if you have an oil lamp, you can't tell the difference between the flame and its color. They're indistinguishable. So in that moment, we're thinking of form as self.

At other times, one might regard self as possessing form, which would mean the mind or the formless aspects of experience feels as though it possesses form the way a tree has a shadow. So it's as if the mind is possessing form as self.

Form as in self means that in that moment, we're positing or thinking of the formless—which could be mind experience—as a self within which the form is situated. This is like the way a scent is in the flower. So it's as if we're thinking in that moment of self as vast mental activity, and form is within it.

And self as in form means that you're thinking of form, and the self—the sense of the formless, the mind, the consciousness—is within the form the way a jewel might be in a basket.

Don't try to remember these, but they're just different ways that in a particular moment we're positing a sense of self. So that's in relation to form.

And then these same four are applied in relation to all the other four aggregates: feeling, perception, volitional formations—you know, actions of mind, internal formations—and consciousness.

So at any particular time, we might be regarding feeling as self, or perception as self, or some volitional internal formation as self, or consciousness as self, and each of those in any of those four ways.

You see, it's very subtle. We might think, "Well, I know this body isn't me." But there could be more subtle ways that we're relating to the body as being within a sense of self, which is consciousness, for example.

So our view—sakkāya-diṭṭhi is just a view, it's not a steady state. It's arising in relationship to experience frequently, and because it can arise in any of these twenty different ways, we don't always recognize it. We might be really familiar with two or three of those ways and we don't get caught in them anymore. But there are seventeen others that we just don't quite see.

So then Sāriputta goes on, taking form just as the example. The person then lives obsessed by the notions: "I am form, form is mine." As he lives obsessed by these notions, that form of his changes and alters. Heck of a nerve, but it does. With the change of form, there arises in him—guess what—sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair. The same for all of these: the form alters, the feeling alters, the perception, the volitional formations, any of our internal experience and consciousness.

So this is the basic definition of sakkāya-diṭṭhi. You see, I wanted to go through it all. It's clear and it's not. It's actually very subtle.

Now, when Sāriputta says we think of form as me, that form changes and alters, and we get really lost in displeasure, in despair, in sorrow—that's not rocket science to see how we do that, right?

Am I right? I mean, that's pretty obvious to see. The body changes—where it didn't hurt, suddenly there is pain. Vedana changes—where you had a nice pleasant calm breath, suddenly the whole sitting gets tight and hard, strong sensations are coming, and you're getting like needles sticking in you, and it's unpleasant vedana. It's changed. Our perceptions shift and change. Sometimes just in deep states of concentration, our perceptions of what's going on in our body, in the world, get really weird. It can be scary. It certainly is unfamiliar.

That change in perception, the change in vedana, the change in form gives rise to all kinds of thoughts and conclusions and comparing—and more vedana and more thoughts and more sense of self and enormous suffering. What does it mean about me? Or our perceptions can shift in how we think others here are looking at us, or thinking about us, or speaking to us, or just how they look, what's going on with them. Perceptions are unreliable, but they shift and we get really upset. God knows our internal formations are changing all the time. From talking to people and from my own experience, that's often one of the biggest areas where, when they change, we really get lost in obsessive suffering about it, confusion—me, me, me. Or we resist, or we blame.

And all of that, in some way, we are depositing a personality belief, identity belief, around any of these aspects of experience, or around our resistance to it, or around the conclusion: what does this mean about me? In that, we are practicing the path of self-identification. We're practicing the cultivation of sakkāya-diṭṭhi—which isn't to then start blaming, because you can't even claim sakkāya-diṭṭhi as yours. It's just another conditioned arising. If we hate when personality view arises, we're practicing the path of cultivating personality view again.

But if we can just see it as another arising appearance—oh yeah, here's personality view, I'm totally and completely identified with this and I want it to go away—oh yeah, that's personality view, it feels like this—then we're not cultivating it in that moment.

So the Buddha elaborated in another sutta a little bit more on what Sariputta said, how we create suffering from sakkāya-diṭṭhi. And he started this sutta by saying, "I will teach you agitation through clinging." You might think we don't need to be taught agitation through clinging. I think what he means is: I will explain to you how that happens. And then he follows it with, "And I will teach you non-agitation through non-clinging."

So he begins with the same set of explanations of what sakkāya-diṭṭhi is—you know, an uninstructed worldling regards self as form, and through that whole thing. And then he says, with the change and alteration of the form, the feeling, the perception, the formations, the consciousness—I like this, it's a little subtler, but it's really how it seems to happen in my experience—with the alteration of this sense of experience we're calling self, his consciousness becomes preoccupied with that change.

Even if it's a change for the so-called better, it's easy to get preoccupied with it. Ah, now the sitting's really going good. How did I get there? How can I keep it going? What does this mean about my practice? What stage might I be at? We become preoccupied with the change, and then—agitation. See, even if it's a change that we like, that preoccupation leads to agitation in the mind, agitation in the energy body.

Agitation and a constellation of mental states, born of preoccupation with the change of form, remain obsessing his mind or her mind. And this can be extremely gross, where we really know it. And it can be on very subtle levels. Agitation can be the kind of agitation where you just have to run around in the woods for an hour because you're so preoccupied with the alteration and the constellation of mental

states that have arisen. Or it can be an agitation arising from a state of quite a bit of tranquility—as Marcia talked about in her last talk, the tranquility in samādhi—but there's a change and some me-ness. Oh, yeah. My consciousness is getting tranquil. What does that mean? And the agitation is on a subtler level, but it's agitation nonetheless, obsessing in the mind, a constellation of mental states. It's the same pattern.

And I think this is interesting. Because his or her mind is obsessed, he is frightened, distressed and anxious, and through clinging he becomes more agitated. And this is really, to me, the way it happens—gross or subtle, never mind.

It's the same pattern, it's the same way it works. Because the mind at that moment is obsessed—really from grasping to the sense of self in the change, the alteration of form or perception or consciousness or vedana, or internal formations—because the mind is obsessed with that change in any way, all these thoughts start in the agitation. Out of that obsession, fear arises, some form of distress and anxiety, and then there's more clinging and more agitation. This is the ongoing arising, moment after moment, of the experience of sakkāya-diṭṭhi, sense of self.

Obviously, as he goes on to teach non-agitation through non-clinging, it's simply that when there is no sakkāya-diṭṭhi arising in the moment around the alteration of experience, then there's no agitation. There's no clinging to the experience and there's no agitation. That's non-agitation through non-clinging.

The only difference is that subtle arising in the moment of some aspect of experience being held as self, and then all the reactions that come from that. Sometimes it's so obvious, but sometimes it's so subtle. It does sometimes seem like we practice so diligently, for so many years, paying such close attention, having seen so often that any of these particular experiences comes and goes, isn't self. We know that in some way, but then we don't. If we really knew it, it would be our hoots.

So, not to get frustrated or discouraged—because that is merely obsessing, identifying with some internal formation and getting agitated and clinging. But to have a healthy respect for how deeply, how well we have practiced, in at least this lifetime, sakkāya-diṭṭhi. We've really practiced it many, many mind moments, to the point that it's so familiar, so often, that we don't even notice it. That's why we have to really sharpen our mindfulness, our continuity, our samādhi, to be able to see more clearly, to see through it.

So what does it mean? I'll move away from the suttas for a moment. Practically, in our experience, I just want to share something I was noticing. I think it was the last retreat I sat. I sat here for the month of April, really exploring and experiencing the difference between being caught and identified in a particular train of internal formation, of saṅkhāra, and when that sense of clinging to, identifying with any aspect of experience is gone.

Really experientially, what does that mean to us? And as I said, I know you all know it, but just to look carefully: what is it? That's the hook for me. And it might be different for all of us at different times. What

is the place where the sense of self is hooking on that's keeping me in this experience?

Even when we know this happens—just before I came up, I was closing the Saṃyutta Nikāya, and there was a sutta there that popped out at me about a monk who was very sick and had been practicing for years, a long time, and he was really upset. He went to the Buddha because he was really sick, and he said basically what any of us might say: "I'm used to practicing and having this real depth of samādhi and abiding in tranquility, and I always could get there, and now I can't do it. Now I can't get my samādhi. What happened?"

And you can just hear the Buddha—he's kind of like, "Haven't I told you things change?" It really sounded like that. "Let me see, have I ever said anything to you about mental states being impermanent? Feeling is impermanent, conditions are impermanent..." He runs through the whole thing. He didn't say, "Don't worry, you'll get your samādhi back, it's okay." He just said, "Wake up. Everything's changing. Let it go." That's my inflection a little bit, but that was basically what he said. And we all know that, don't we?

So what I was exploring—not consciously, but I just really started noticing it this spring when I was sitting—at times it would be pretty clear going along, not a lot of emotional stuff. But I noticed, I remember, it was early in the morning. I'd get up and go down to get a cup of tea, then I'd start practicing around 2:30 or 3:00. A good friend of mine, who was also sitting, would usually be down there walking.

I've noticed for myself when I first get up, before I've had a moment to settle in, my mind is not quite aware, and I'm more prey to identification with whatever particular patterns I have. They just creep in for a moment. So between my room upstairs and walking down to the tea, even though I was noticing what's happening, that kind of grip of self is coming along with what's happening. I would notice that sense of comparing. I wonder if this is from way back, from my first years of practice. I can't believe this is still here. I'd think, "I wonder if I got up before her today." Who cares? But every morning I'd wonder if I was going to get down there before her or if she was already walking. I would have to watch my mind go through this as I was going down the stairs.

Some days it was just laughing. But every now and then, it would really grip me. I'd notice the comparing and the sense of, "Oh, there she is. She's a better yogi than me." I'd watch this whole thing going. And it's that point where you're really standing on the side, as if saying, "I don't believe this is still running." But there's some little hook—it's not completely unidentified.

So I was looking one morning, really exploring it, and I saw: oh, the hook isn't so much what I thought it was. You think, "Well, I really want to be free from suffering," which at that moment translates into "I want to be free from this really stupid pattern," and so "I want to see through it so it can go away."

But a thought just popped into my mind: oh, the hook actually was, am I willing to be without self-referencing?

The hook into the story—and I've been seeing it more and more—isn't always present, but the times when

I really am seeing what's happening quite clearly, when I can label the whole thing, when I'm not 100% buying in but there's still some hook... it's not about, for me at that point, believing the story at all, or having to fix it, or having to say, "No, it really doesn't matter if she's there before you, it doesn't mean you're a worthless yogi," trying to pretend I'm really above all of this. I saw the hook was: to be completely without self-referencing.

So this stuff comes—so what? The referencing back to me was actually the hook, even though it was a suffering story. There's still a familiar sense of "me" about it. And that was actually the sense of identification. Just a subtle, very subtle feeling of me who needs to see through this really stupid story. Or me... I don't know if I can explain it any better.

But I'm just saying: explore this in yourself. It's not just the habit of mind. The times when you can really see through it, but there's a subtle sense of trying to understand it, trying to see how it comes to be in the moment—why is this pattern arising? It's arising out of this and this and that. But there's a subtle sense of "me" behind it. If I just turn around and look at that, and there's just pure awareness in that moment, you notice thought arising, sensation arising, feeling arising, mood arising, and no referring back to me at all. There's no "me" in that moment who's caught in this pattern, or not caught in this pattern, or walking down the stairs, or anything. It's just awareness receiving sensations, vedana, thoughts, without any constellation of "me" in it. It's all just empty space.

And in that, a feeling would suddenly come up—a subtle sense of: I don't know if I want to be without self-referencing. Even if it's a slightly suffering story, that sense of "me" is so familiar, like a comfortable old coat that you want to slip into even though it's hot and you really don't need it and it's just dragging you down and making you sweat. Still, you know—like that kid in the Peanuts cartoon who had to drag around his blanket all the time because it was comfortable. Anyway, I don't know if I'm making any sense at all, but explore that.

When there's the immediacy of wakeful presence, just noticing form arising, feeling arising, sensation arising, mood arising, thoughts arising, just arising without referring back to anything—there's no problem. There's no agitation. There's nothing one has to do to change that formation, to get rid of it. It really doesn't matter if thoughts are arising like, "I wonder if I got up ahead of her, or she got up ahead of me, or why is this happening?" It doesn't matter. Those thoughts are arising in empty space. Awareness is just receiving thoughts, and there's nothing to do with them. It's not a problem. Nothing needs to be fixed. One doesn't have to suddenly think, "I've got to move into awareness, I'd better do metta, I'd better..."

There's just no sense of sakkaya-ditthi, no sense of self, and hence no problem. You know that way Ajahn Sumedho talks about sakkaya-ditthi—the difference between "my sadness" and "oh, sadness is like this." Me walking down the stairs knowing, "oh, comparing, being a bad yogi, that's my pattern"—or simply: "oh, comparing feels like this." Just what it is. It doesn't matter if it's comparing or it's incredible bliss. It really doesn't make any difference. It's just like this.

And then for me, just to notice that more and more, I could see the hook into the sakkaya-ditthi wasn't the suffering nature of the pattern, but: am I really willing in that moment to be without self-referencing altogether?

Just a word for those of you practicing metta: in a different way it brings us to the same place, the same experience. You may not be turning into arising sensation, arising thought, arising vedana, because you're just getting absorbed into the metta feeling, absorbed into the phrases and the image. But in that, as the absorption and the metta grows, there also stops being any sense of self-referencing. It stops being me having metta for me, or you, or anyone. There's just metta. There's not this sense of me and other. And in that all-inclusive space, it doesn't feel exactly the same as emptiness, but it works the same way in which there stops being a sense of sakkaya-ditthi. No more sense of self-referencing. It's just metta and that's all.

Notice in those times how freeing it is. It's just like this. And how easily, how tricky—

especially with internal formations like this, our mind or our awareness, whatever you want to call it, gets subtly seduced back into identifying in some way with the particular. Especially when it's a repetitive pattern, an internal formation, a repetitive personality pattern—you get caught up and identified with it.

So that ability to just recognize, "Oh, sadness is like this. Worthlessness is like this. Comparing is like this"—it might really be just empty space like that for a moment, just pure awareness receiving sensations. And then suddenly, it's very "me" again.

I noticed—and I'm sure there are many more—but I noticed a few ways that the attention gets tricked back into identifying again. I'll share my ways; I'm sure you've got your own.

One, of course, is when it's a difficult or unpleasant mental formation—comparing or fear or worthlessness or blame or jealousy, you name it. Of course we get tricked back into a personality view about it, relating to it out of aversion, out of wanting it to go away, out of thinking we need to fix it.

Another way we get tricked in is out of fascination with it. This is what was happening to me walking down the stairs that morning. And it can really seem like we're being dharmic about it—trying to figure out how this is arising in the moment, what arising experience is giving rise to this comparing. We're sort of being dharmic, but there's a way we're really clinging to the fascination of wanting to understand it so that I can understand how "I," great as I am, keep getting tricked back into believing in comparing. How does it arise? How does it go? But there's an identification in that moment, a sakaya-ditti around the formation, and grasping of wanting to understand.

And of course, the obvious one: getting caught up over and over in any particular thought form or aspect of the story. So I'm walking down the stairs, and just when I think I've got it all figured out and I'm not really identified—but this is just thinking about it, trying not to identify—and you think, "Yes, it's just comparing arising due to my old patterns from when I was a child," and you think you've got it all nicely managed, some new thought comes up: "But it's because it's that particular friend, and that really triggers

me because..." And then you're really back in it again. Me, me, me. When can you just let the pattern be there, not about you at all? It's very tricky, very tricky.

So we explore where we get caught and how the mind gets tricked back into relating to any aspect of experience as sakaya-ditti. Those moments when there's just the pattern, just the formation, the sensations, the thoughts, the contact arising and passing, and there's no holding it together in our consciousness as a sense of me—just awareness receiving experience—that's really anatta. That's a moment of perceiving anatta.

And I just want to say this: in the moment that anatta is really the falling away of the sense of me, of any self-referencing, anatta is liberation from a false sense of self. It's really a moment of freedom.

But anatta is not a path of annihilation. It's not that we are looking to experience anatta out of hatred, self-hatred, or aversion to our experience—"Let me please just see the emptiness of this because I really hate what's happening." As if we're looking to let it just be experience being received in awareness because "I've got to get out of this." And sometimes that "I've got to get out of this" transfers into "I've got to get out of this whole life," this whole body-mind experience, in a negative way, in a way that's actually more identification. That's sakaya-ditti too—clinging to non-being.

But when there's that just seeing, really being with all the arising experience without referring any aspect of it, without making sakaya-ditti out of any of it—in that moment it really is the dissolving of the whole issue. The whole issue just goes away, and nothing needs to change. You don't have to get out of comparing. Whether it's a problem or not simply falls away.

But not if we're looking for anatta out of a sense of self-hatred or aversion to any experience. That's just more sakaya-ditti—having ourselves in reference to reacting to a particular experience with a sense of self.

So just exploring, just exploring how the sense of sakaya-ditti—relating to any aspect of experience as "this is mine," or "this experience is within me," or "I am within that experience"—notice how that arises. Notice the liberation from that, the freedom from that. Both are happening all the time. Just as I said, we're practicing sakaya-ditti a lot. But I don't want to leave it on that kind of downbeat. We also here are cultivating the path of practicing freedom from identity view, freedom from creating a sense of self.

So back to the suttas. There's one sutta where someone asked the Buddha, "How should one know, how should one see, for identity view to be abandoned?" And this is really one very succinct description of our path of practice. His answer: "Bhikkhu, when one knows and sees the eye as impermanent, in that moment identity view is abandoned." But he goes on: "When one then knows and sees forms—so there's the eye and there's forms, what the eye sees—when one knows and sees forms as impermanent, in that moment identity view is abandoned." And then eye consciousness: the eye and forms give rise to eye consciousness. When knowing turns to that...

When one sees eye consciousness is impermanent, identity view is abandoned. When all of these come together—there's your eye, there's a form, there's knowing, there's consciousness in that moment—that moment of actual seeing is called contact, sense contact. So he says then, when one knows and sees eye contact as impermanent, identity view is abandoned. And when one knows and sees whatever feeling, whatever vedana arises with eye contact as the condition—so there's the seeing, it's impermanent, you don't notice that, but it's really pleasant, and you notice that that pleasantness is impermanent—then identity view is abandoned.

And he goes, of course, through all the six sense doors: ear, sounds, ear consciousness, ear contact, the actual hearing, whatever feeling arises due to ear contact, hearing contact. Smell, taste, body—body and tactile phenomena, body consciousness, the contact when you're actually aware of feeling and whatever feeling arises. And the mind, the mind as a sense door, whatever mental phenomena arise—subtle mental phenomena or really gross thoughts, feelings, emotions, or subtle perceptions, whatever mental phenomena arise. The consciousness, the mental consciousness, and mind contact, which I think is really interesting, and whatever feeling arises.

I go through all of those because I think this points to a very subtle and very precise way that we can bring mindfulness into our practice here. It gives us a lot of choices, whatever in a moment is particularly obvious in our experience. So say there's a loud sound. It might not be that you notice the ear first and think, "Oh yes, the ear is impermanent." You may not have even noticed the consciousness of hearing, but you could be aware of contact. Right at that point of hearing, contact. And notice that that contact is impermanent. It's gone already. Maybe you don't notice the contact, but you notice, "Oh, that's an unpleasant sound, unpleasant." It's gone already. Unpleasant is impermanent.

With all the five physical senses—and personally I think to really bring the sense of noticing the impermanence in at the mind door is especially powerful. I was noticing just walking today, taking a walk, and paying attention to that moment of contact at the mind door, mental phenomena, and the point of contact. So say a little mood arises, no big deal. Can I just notice that point of contact when there's knowing of sadness, that first moment of really connecting? Oh, contact. And as soon as you notice, it's impermanent. As soon as you notice that contact, it's already changed. It doesn't mean the mood is gone, but it shifts slightly and there's another contact. Or the vedana that comes from it—you notice, "Oh, that's slightly unpleasant," and as soon as you're noticing unpleasant, it shifted and became neutral in that moment. You notice neutral, it shifts and went back to unpleasant.

This, of course, takes some mindfulness. It takes some continuity of mindfulness leading into samadhi. It's hard to see and notice on this level, especially of contact and vedana and impermanence, when we're so busy in daily life and so much stuff is coming in. If I were to go talk at CIMC in a couple of weeks in Cambridge, where people just come in from their daily life, and I start talking about noticing the moment of mental contact and how it's impermanent—people are running around crazy busy. What are you talking about? I'm lucky if I can notice I'm furious, never mind the moment of mental contact, the moment

of vedana.

But here we are able to really cultivate the mind, to use our sati, our mindfulness, and the continuity of mindfulness to begin to see through our inverted perceptions, to begin to see more clearly. When we really bring in our mindfulness to the point of the sense door, to the point of the sense contact or the vedana, not to change it but just to notice its impermanence, this really begins to and deeply undercuts the whole habit of sakkāya-diṭṭhi. Because when we're really cellularly experiencing the impermanence on this quick-changing level, you really just can't make too much of anything. Even the strongest, most habitual story about yourself or mood that you have or feeling in your body—when you are noticing on that point of contact, tactile sensation and contact with awareness changing, the sense of "it's me, this form is mine, this contact is mine"... by the time you've even gotten that formed, it's already changed. And it all just starts to become so much more ephemeral, so much less solid, so much more free.

As the Buddha said though, we have a tendency not to notice the impermanence of things. We know it intellectually. He talks about the inverted perceptions, the perversions of perception, where we tend to perceive what is impermanent and changing as permanent, what is unsatisfactory, what is unreliable, as happiness, as satisfactory.

What is not self, we perceive as self.

And on the level of anicca, impermanence—which is really what the Buddha keeps talking about in terms of seeing through sakkāya-diṭṭhi, what I just read—to really cellularly see through our habit of assuming permanence truly does take continuity of mindfulness. I feel personally that it's the lack of continuity of mindfulness that hides impermanence.

We all know everything's changing. But cellularly, we don't necessarily quite get it. Again, this is something the Dalai Lama said—I think it was at that same teaching. He said we think we understand long-term anicca. On some level we all really know, sort of, that we're going to die. We know that people are born, that they get sick and they die. *They.* When *we* get sick, well, we have to go through some dharma work to say, "Oh, you're right, I know that really happens. But to *me*, now?" But we all know that happens.

He says the tendency is to think—even with moods, even with something quicker—we think, "Well, this sensation, this unpleasant sensation, I know it's impermanent. It's going to go away." When? We tend to think it arises, it persists for a while, and then it goes away. It changes. That is inaccurate. That's assuming permanence. Where? In that "persists for a while." Nothing persists for a while, even that much. Nothing. He said impermanence means constant flux.

When we're thinking, "This is arising, my life is persisting for a while, and then it's going away"—and we do that—when we turn in here and look, what is persisting for a while? What has persisted just exactly the same for any two mind moments in a row, if we're really looking?

That's one of the distortions of perception that can happen in deep practice—one that can really flip us out for a while. There's nowhere to take a stand. There's nothing staying the same. And I need something, back to even if it's a suffering sense of me, at least it's familiar. I can land there.

When we really have a continuity of mindfulness, moment after moment after moment, you really start to see—and don't believe me, you can't, it really has to be from our own experience—but there isn't anything persisting. And at first, second, and third, we might hate that. No, I need *something*. But once that sense of me wanting something—that's also not persisting—goes away, it's just how it is. No problem.

This is why the continuity of sati is so important. Otherwise we see this pain, we pay attention to something else, we space out for a while, we go off into a daydream, and then we come back and, oh, there's the pain, and it's been the same. So we're assuming permanence. We don't notice that ten million things happened in there, and while you were lost in the daydream, you can't actually prove that that pain was there—you weren't aware of it. Like that question: if the tree falls in the forest and nobody's there, do you hear it? Don't think about that. But in your experience, the experience was not pain. The experience was you were off in Sumatra somewhere, hunting orangutans. And then you come back and, "Oh, this pain, it's been the same all day." You know, it changed in the night. "Oh, I see, there really is change. The pain went away."

That's why when we talk about continuity of mindfulness, it doesn't mean you don't space out. It's that willingness to just notice this moment, then this moment, then this moment. That's why noting as a tool is so immensely useful. When we're just noting—very quietly labeling whether it's rising and falling, or vibrating, thinking, unpleasant, contact, vibrating, tingling, color—you see that it's something different every moment. And then you realize you didn't note for a while, and you come back and start noting again. It brings you in much more moment to moment. It's possible to be that aware without noting, for sure.

But it's also easy to be saying, "Oh yes, I'm really aware of this pain. I'm aware of the body. I'm aware of awareness. And I'm receiving sensations in awareness. And I'm just feeling the pain." And it's all the same. It's a crock. It's pleasant, maybe. We're half experiencing stuff and half making it up. Which is why we don't know what's going on so often. When we're making it up, we're assuming—often in that assuming—permanence or some subtle sense of self. We're assuming something and we don't even know what.

We're just noticing, noting or not, but just connecting your awareness with each moment, each experience, whatever it is. That gives the space. You might say, "What do you mean space? Noting every moment, there's no space—that's why I hate it and I don't want to do it." But it actually gives the space for us to notice what's actually happening, rather than what we subtly think might be happening, or want to be happening, or how we analyze what's happening. We don't have a clue. If we could just notice the arising experience, moment after moment, it actually gives huge space. Because when that happens and

when there's a sense of sakkāya-diṭṭhi coming, we notice it. It's really obvious—that sense of contraction, that sense of self.

And through the steadiness of mindfulness is how samādhi, how concentration, develops. That stillness, that depth of observing power, really supports and strengthens and allows the observing power to get more and more subtle, to actually notice the moments of mind contact and how that changes as soon as you notice it. That's why we're so fortunate, really, to have the opportunity to practice like this. It doesn't mean anyone's practice should look any particular way, but we just have the opportunity to really cultivate the stillness and the observing power to begin to notice the changing nature of all our sense experience—the sense contact, the sense consciousness, and the vedanā that goes along with it.

Well, I have all these other great stories. Okay, two more.

Sakkāya-diṭṭhi, in the form of the definition that I gave you—those twenty ways—is said in the Theravāda tradition to be dissipated at the first stage of enlightenment, personality view. And of course the question then arises: how come it seems to keep going? It doesn't seem to disappear. It seems like if that's all gone, one would be a complete arahant.

There's a sutta I've known about for years that's really fascinating, because even though those twenty ways of positing self or thinking some aspect of the aggregates is me—that can be seen through—and still it's so subtle. The tendency, the residual tendency to conceit, to the sense of comparing with others, that doesn't go until one's an arahant. The tendency, the subtle sense to grasp at any aspect of experience. The underlying tendency just to have the feeling of "I am." These are so subtle and so deeply rooted that even when you're seeing clearly the impermanence of all these things we mentioned, there can still arise some subtle sense of "I am" that you can't quite pin down.

So if that's happening to you, and you think, "But I'm past that by now"—don't lose heart.

There's this sutta where one monk, Khemaka is his name, and some other monks... he's very sick. I don't know why a lot of these monks were sick and old. Other monks came to him and they were asking him, "What's your experience?" And he said, "You know, I do not grasp at any of the aggregates as me or mine. I know I'm not form. I know I'm not perception. I know I'm not consciousness." He goes through all of them. And so they go back saying, "Oh, he's an arahant, he's an arahant." And then they come back to him. And he said, "No, I'm not."

He said, "I still have..." And this is very interesting. He said, "Even though I do not speak of feeling as 'I am,' or perception as 'I am,' I don't grasp any of these as 'I am'—there still lingers in me, there still is a residual feeling of 'I am' that arises. The notion 'I am' has not vanished in my experience. The feeling, the tendency, the notion 'I am' does arise as if this 'I am,' even though I don't say I am perception, I am form. There's still the habit of this feeling of 'I am' arising."

And as an example, he says, "Suppose there's the scent of a blue, red, or white lotus. Would one be

speaking correctly if one would say the scent of the flower belongs to the petals, or the scent only belongs to the stalk, or it belongs only to the pistils?" And the monks say, "No, you'd have to say the scent is part of the whole flower."

And he said, it's exactly like that. I don't speak of form as I am, but I can't say I am is completely separate from form. I don't speak of perceptions or feeling as I am, but somehow the notion of I am, the underlying tendency to conceit, still tends to arise somehow within this field of mental and physical experience.

He couldn't really be more clear than that. I found that kind of heartening, because it explains why, I think, at times we've all practiced a lot and we've really seen deeply the impermanence of these things. There are times when you really know, I'm not identifying with this body, I'm not identifying with this emotion, I don't think I'm this perception. You really know it, but there's that whiff of I-ness hanging around. You really can't put your finger on it, but you can say, okay, I-ness is here. It feels like this.

And the practice isn't any different. It's not that we have to do something different. Again, Khemaka says, you just keep on dwelling, contemplating the rise and fall of the five aggregates subject to clinging. Just keep on noticing the impermanence of the things I mentioned—the five aggregates, the six senses, the sense doors, the sense objects, contact and feeling. Just keep noticing. That's all.

With saddhā, with trust, with faith, that as our perception gets clearer and clearer, we will no longer be sucked back, deluded back, into believing sakkāya-diṭṭhi. And that indefinable whiff of self that can drag us back into so much confusion and suffering will finally dissipate completely.

I want to close with one sutta about how fortunate we are to have these teachings and this practice, to have this time. This is a sutta to Anāthapiṇḍika. Anāthapiṇḍika was perhaps the biggest lay supporter, the most generous lay supporter of the Buddha in his lifetime, totally devoted—a layman, married with family. But he was said to have attained the first stage of awakening, and was incredibly generous.

In this sutta, he's very sick and basically dying. He asks for Sāriputta and Ānanda to come to him and give him teachings. They come and ask how he's doing, and he's in incredible pain in his body, in his head. So Sāriputta starts teaching him. It's a long teaching, I won't give you all of it, but it's very much in line with what we've been talking about tonight.

He starts out by saying, you should train yourself: I will not cling to the ear, I will not cling to the nose, I will not cling to the eye, I will not cling to the mind. He goes through all the sense doors. I will not cling to forms. I will not cling to eye consciousness. I will not cling to eye contact. Going through all these same things we just talked about. I will not cling to material form, to feeling, to all the aggregates—the kind of teachings that I was just sharing, that we all can explore every day in our practice.

And Sāriputta ends it with: I will not cling to what is seen, to what is heard, to what is sensed, to what is cognized, to what is encountered. I will not cling to what is sought after. I will not cling to what is examined by the mind. And my consciousness will not be dependent on that.

At this point, Anāthapiṇḍika started weeping. Sāriputta and Ānanda actually said, what's the matter? Are you sinking? Are you dying?

And he says, no. I have been waiting on the teacher and the bhikkhus for so long, for my whole life, and never have I heard such a teaching on the Dhamma as this, with such depth. It's so profound.

And Sāriputta says, yes, we don't give such deep talk on Dhamma to lay people, implying in a way that it's too hard for them to see. We give it to those who have gone forth.

And Anāthapiṇḍika says, well, please, let such talk on Dhamma be given to lay people. There are those who can see, those who can understand.

So profound and beautiful. And then they leave and he died, and of course was reborn as a deva and came and sang praises to Sāriputta and to the Buddha.

I get chills when I think of that—his weeping at the power of that teaching, saying, please let it be shared with lay people. And now, yes, almost all of us here are lay people and we have the opportunity not just to

You know, at the eye door, the ear door, the nose door, the mind door, the body door, the mouth door. See the impermanence. See where we're caught. See sakkāya-diṭṭhi arise and pass without needing to change it, without needing to do anything.

And just appreciate—appreciating our great good fortune in this life.

So let's just sit quietly for a moment.

May the beneficial energies of our practice be shared with all beings, in all realms, in all conditions. May our practice be the cause for their happiness and liberation from suffering.

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