Faith and the Illusion of Self

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:07:57

So now we're back from the world of just pure presence in nature to the world of concepts and ideas. Even though we sit here talking about no concepts, the whole fact of sitting here making noise and exchanging words—and it means something, hopefully—it's so amazing, but it's so conceptual.

I want to go on a little bit more from what Joseph was talking about last night, about the experience of no lasting self. I want to talk about it in a very experiential way, pointing our practice, our moment-to-moment awareness, back to this sense of self as it seems to arise and exploring what it is.

But first, I want to take a little diversion. Because when we begin to talk about concepts and what's the reality underneath the concepts—almost without fail, especially for people whose first retreat it is—if Joseph had done a question period this afternoon, he would have been bombarded with questions about "if there's no self, fill in the blanks." Because the concept of it, in itself, in hearing about it, until it's our actual experience, until it's experiential, intuitive understanding, true or not, it's just another concept.

And what that tends to do for us—certainly I spent years in this—is we take that concept, and the concept alone isn't enough to blast through, to help us see through the inaccurate perceptions or the inaccurate concepts we've been living with all our life. And in fact, there's no real reason to believe that the idea of selflessness is any more true than what seems like our experience of being a pretty ongoing identifiable self.

What often tends to happen in this experience—it certainly happened to me often and for years—is that it sets up a sense of the mind just starting to spin. You start to think about it, try to bring it into experience, you try to analyze it, and you really can get into quite an energy, a mental energy of thinking about, analyzing, figuring out, comparing. What is this sense of no-self? Trying to figure it out with our minds, with our reason, with our logic.

And I wish my saying this would be enough. I know it won't be, but I'll say it anyway: it won't work. It will never work. We can never figure out with thinking, with our mind, with opinion, with logic—we can never somehow figure out or make sense of this idea of no-self because it can only be understood experientially. It can only be something we touch with our awareness free of previous concept.

What can start to happen is that we take really fascinating ideas like no-self, and analyzing and thinking about them can be really interesting. It can feel like we're really practicing, we're really grabbing hold of something juicy here. But what it actually can turn into is doubt.

Doubt is somewhat obvious when it manifests as a thought of "I can't do this," or "this is stupid," or "I don't

think they know what they're talking about," or whatever. But another way that doubt arises in our experience is that it masquerades as analytical thinking. So we're sitting there, and we start to pay attention. "But that's not me. That can't be me. Is that pain me? Now, if there's no me, how come I feel that pain? How come I have an opinion?" And the mind just starts going and going and going.

The way doubt manifests as a hindrance—when Joseph spoke of the hindrances the other day—the way doubt manifests is just this: the mind is spinning and spinning, thoughts are going, and there is a complete inability, when doubt is present, for the attention, for the mind to just land on anything. It'll keep just landing and skittering off. And when it's masquerading as analytical thought, each experience will just trigger off a whole other set of ways to think about it.

And believe me, I've spent a lot of time doing this. At first it seems somewhat fulfilling. It's a lot more interesting than all the other stupid thoughts I was sitting with for days before. "This is Dharma thoughts, so this is okay to hang out with." Just notice: if it's this sense of spinning, spinning, not able to touch anything, it's doubt, no matter what the content is.

On a level of moment-to-moment practice experience as you're sitting or walking and you notice this, the antidote to doubt is sustained attention. So, for example, you're thinking about whatever—I'm using no-self as the example since that's what I'm talking about—but you're thinking, you're analyzing, "What about this?" And you notice that. Okay, label "doubt." It's a hindrance. Simply noticing it. And then bring your attention just to something that's happening. It doesn't matter what, but hopefully not the thought because you'll get too sucked in. Come back to the breath.

If that's too subtle, come back to a sense of your body sitting, a sense of your butt on the pillow, your hands touching, any physical sensation. Sound, if that's a clear one for you. But if it's a little vague, you might get sucked back into the thought—so come back to your feet walking.

If you can get the attention just to land on something, and as soon as the thoughts start to come back again, sustain the attention, what happens is the attention deepens, lands in the present moment, and those thoughts just start to fade. You don't have to resolve them one way or the other. You're just coming out and landing in the moment. That's sustained attention. That is the momentary kind of practice-model antidote to doubt.

Of course, the big trick is recognizing it as doubt.

What gives us the energy to do that, on a bigger moment-to-moment level of practice, is that we have to come out of our usual way of trying to figure things out. And this is beyond just doubt. It's the willingness to move from our reliance on knowledge, from our reliance on reasoning, to surrender into whatever is happening without prior expectations.

In a way, you could call this faith. Faith is another strategy for being with our experience that's different from knowledge.

I'm going to give you two definitions of faith. I don't know how you all relate to the word. It depends on your different backgrounds and conditioning. For me, I didn't really have much of a religious upbringing—we were Protestant and we went to church and all, but somehow it didn't seem to stick or really have much of anything. So my associations with the word faith were secondhand. It was more of a sense of belief on demand—belief in what somebody told me, belief in a particular set of doctrines or in a particular person, without any kind of proof. Of course, my logical mind would want proof, but this was a demand to follow and believe without anything to rely on.

The faith that I'm talking about in our context of practice here is not that at all. It's not blind belief. It is definitely not anything that demands an abandoning of our own intuitive sense of wisdom or understanding. It's not like the Jim Jones kind of thing, where you follow the leader and drink poison Kool-Aid and everybody dies. That's the worst connotation of faith, and I'm not talking about anything like that.

Here are two definitions I've read in different commentaries. One is: the drive towards that which cannot be described—that kind of yearning, the drive towards truth, towards whatever you want to call it. The second one is: confidence based on verified knowledge. I might call it verified faith. And this is really where this Vipassana practice takes us.

Faith is a kind of combination of confidence and trust. Trust that lets us be willing to be with our experience without expectation, without need for payoff or justification, without knowing anything that's going to happen or having a preset idea. And confidence is the strength or the willingness, the fearlessness that lets us meet experience without any kind of promise.

It's what lets you sit here and be with an unbearable pain in your knee. There's no promise that anything wonderful is going to happen from that. But there's some confidence and some trust that allows one to do that. Hopefully it's not blind faith. Hopefully it really begins to come from our own verified experience—confidence based on verified knowledge. But again, intuitive knowledge, not the kind of knowledge that I grew up valuing as the highest truth, as the point of safety and place of finding self-worth.

I don't know about you, although I imagine many of you, given the training you've had and the jobs you do, have had to spend a lot of your life acquiring certain sets of knowledge—even just going through regular school. And I was really very good at it. I could take in whatever things I was supposed to know—reasons, facts, ways to do things, explanations for what the universe was—take it in, memorize it, internalize it, spit it out. But I was also unknowingly taking that knowledge as a view of the world, and even more, in some way, as a sort of security. It's like a resting place. If I have knowledge, a way to describe a certain event or experience, if I can go out in the woods and name the animals and name the trees and the weather patterns and what kind of clouds and what's going on, then I feel like I have a certain kind of safety, a certain kind of security, some place to rest.

In some way, this sense of knowledge, this body of knowledge, can certainly be very useful. I'm not saying we throw out all knowledge. But it's important to see it for what it is. We can take this body of knowledge and treat it as a bastion against insecurity, against having to live and dance in what's actually true—the constancy of unknowing, the fact that we never know what's going to happen, even in the next moment.

For me, and I'm probably not the only one, certain sets of knowledge can really serve as a comfort. But it's a way to hide. And even without wanting to use it as a way to hide, with that sense of security, we can really identify with whatever the knowledge is, and it blocks our potential or our willingness to perceive other possibilities—to open to another possibility at all.

There's a story the Buddha told that illustrates this. A widower, a poor peasant, had a young son. They lived in a small village of huts. One day, the father had gone away. While he was gone, some bandits came and basically destroyed the village, burned all the huts and killed the people. But they kidnapped his son and took him away.

So the father comes back, finds everything destroyed, finds some bones he thinks are his son's. He weeps, so distraught, so upset—believing completely that this is what happened. He took the ashes and wore them in a little bag around his neck, totally unable to recover. He rebuilt his house and continued living, but was completely miserable. He had totally bought the story: this is what happened. That became knowledge. These bandits came, destroyed the village, killed my son.

At some point, his son escaped, and late at night came back to the village. He found the hut and was banging on it, calling, "Father, father, let me in!" But the father was so caught in his description of what had happened as being truth that he yelled down, "Don't mock me! My son is dead! This is so painful!" The child kept calling out, "Father, let me in!" But the father couldn't open to the possibility that maybe he was wrong—to the point that he never went down, shooed his son away, and they never saw each other again.

It's a heart-wrenching, exaggerated story, but it makes the point of how locked we can get in knowledge, in what we think is a true description. It blinds us to being able to even explore—I mean, to even stick his head out the window and say, "Oh yeah, maybe it could be my son. Let me check it out." That's what we're doing all the time with our assumptions of who we are, what Joseph was talking about last night with our assumptions of time, our assumptions of past and future, our assumptions of body. All of that keeps us locked in.

This quality of faith—the confidence to meet what's happening with a trust to enter it unknowing, really fully—lets us meet data freshly. What I've found in my practice, and in talking with other people I know I'm not alone, is that I've approached practice wanting to find the answer, wanting to find the truth. I'm basically looking for another explanation, another set of knowledge, because that's what the mind knows how to do. I think, "Well, okay, maybe this one isn't right, but if I find another perfect explanation, then I can rest in that." But the more I look, just with the simplicity of mindfulness, looking into the knowledge we have, it seems to break apart. Instead of more answers, we find more mystery.

This is from the New York Times a couple of years ago—although I just saw an update on it recently and it hasn't changed that much—from the science section. It's talking about the largest galaxy ever detected, whose discovery was announced last week, which includes more than 100 trillion stars and measures more than 6 million light years in diameter. The galaxy is 60 times the size of Earth's galaxy, the Milky Way. Big, big.

This newfound galaxy is located in the center of an even larger clump of galaxies, a cluster of some 1,000 galaxies called Abel 2029. They've had to name it. What is naming a clump of a thousand galaxies? What does that do? Do we somehow own it? Do we have it under control or something?

Anyway, this is just leading up to the point. The astronomers hope that further study will provide clues to the role played by a mysterious substance called dark matter, since there doesn't appear to be enough ordinary matter in the universe to account for the huge gravitational forces that would seem necessary to cause all this clumping of galaxies. Scientists propose the existence of vast amounts of invisible matter that eludes detection because it emits no radiation. According to their prevailing wisdom, 99% of the universe consists of this missing mass.

It's like us. It's the same, actually. What did Joseph say? All our matter is not the size of a particle of dust. But we can't just take that at face value. I mean, it's interesting, but it doesn't mean anything until we verify it ourselves. What we need is the faith, the willingness to try, that will keep bringing our attention into our experience to really look, to really meet it, to really be willing to open into the possibility of the unknown.

Of course, since this faith is based on our verified experience, when you first come to a retreat like this—your first retreat—you can't have that kind of verified experience. The question often comes up: what got you here the first time? It comes up in my mind for anybody who comes on a first retreat. But there's a quality that's talked about before there can be verified faith, a quality of mind called bright faith.

In some way, something in us is lit up by a quality we experience in someone else. It might be someone you talk to, and either something they said or some quality in the person lights up something indefinable, indescribable in us that gets us to say, "Well, maybe that's worth a try." Or something you read, or something you observe in how certain people behave. Whatever it is, something got each one of you here.

When there's this quality of bright faith, it's like a brightness, an energetic quality of mind and a willingness to look. If you came without that, it would really be hell, because it would be so hard, especially the first few days, without something inside of us—that yearning towards what cannot be described—that keeps us looking, that keeps us coming back to the practice, beyond the reasoning intellect.

But this kind of bright faith is not sustainable. It's really based on looking outside of ourselves for verification, for strength, for confidence.

And that can't be sustained when we hit a really difficult patch. When you start a retreat and your first really difficult patch comes before any kind of bright patch has arrived, it's really hard, because there's no personal experience to give us the confidence with which to meet this—that sense that it's somehow worthwhile.

So this bright faith is going to shift. It's not sustainable. It's going to waver. It's going to fade away. When you hit that space of, "Why did I come here? It's so dreary. It's so controlled. There's so much suffering." That bright faith is really fading, and it fades fast sometimes.

But luckily—and I say luckily because I have so much real trust in just the truth of things—if we simply have enough willingness to keep meeting our experience with a freshness, it begins to open up. And in some way, we begin to experience for ourselves various aspects, not just of what we've been talking about, but of the truth of how things actually are.

So just one little experience of sitting with pain and then seeing that you can simply be with it—and all the fear and all the aversion either fades, or you see the difference between the aversion and the pain, and you see that the pain itself is not suffering. Even if it's just for a second, that is an insight, a sense that things are different from how they seem on the surface.

Even such a moment can somehow energize us for days, which is lucky because sometimes we just get a couple of little moments of insight like that, and a lot more moments of being caught in the seemingly ordinary way our mind has of relating to experience—because that seemingly ordinary, normal way has been conditioned throughout our entire lives.

What I have deep trust in is that the power of truth is so recognizable when we touch it, in whatever form. It's just so obvious somewhere in our hearts, in our beings, that *that* is what's true—that it's truer than our ordinary ways of relating. One moment of truth is more than enough to really light up days of seeming to struggle in the mire.

One of my teachers said that a spark of truth can burn up a mountain of lies. It's not like we have to have equal time somehow.

So what begins to happen—and it will happen uniquely to each person—is that you begin to have experiences that somehow show us our ordinary assumptions, assumptions we might not have even known we had, aren't exactly accurate. And this gives us the strength and the courage and the trust to keep going, to meet each new experience with a faith that doesn't need to know what's going to happen.

Gradually, this quality of faith I'm trying to describe enables us, or opens us, to much more consciously enter into each moment knowing that we're entering totally into the unknown. Maybe when you came on this retreat there was some sense of that. I try to find out from everyone what really goes on, but somewhere you knew, "I don't have a clue what's really going to happen here. It's something I've never done."

But what's actually the case is that every moment of our life, we think we know. It's funny—I'm talking about opening to the unknown when in every moment we don't know, and yet we have this incredibly rigid schedule where almost every moment of the day is planned. I could ask, "2:35, where are you going to be?" And you'd say, "Oh, I'll be in the meditation hall, sitting on my pillow." Maybe. Probably.

It actually blows me away when I come back from India, which is a wonderful place for much more consciously experiencing the fact that you never really know what's going to happen. No matter what I get up in the day and plan to do, the one thing you could be sure of is that's what *wasn't* going to happen that day. It's great for that. It keeps us off balance, but it's much truer to how things actually are.

What amazes me is coming home, and after a couple of weeks I have my day book with my hours all planned, and I look at it and mostly that's what happens. That's what really amazes me. I can tell you where I'm supposed to be on August 15th of next year, and probably there's a good chance that might happen—which is amazing. It's really amazing.

But it sustains the illusion that things are under control. Sure, we have to make plans to live in a relative reality, but it sustains the illusion that just because we make plans, they're going to happen, that somehow we can control that—when actually we don't have a clue what will happen in the next minute.

When you sit down in a sitting, you might have an idea, but actually there's no clue what's going to be the first experience that arises. A sensation in the body? A sound? A pain? The breath? An emotion? Who knows?

When we get down to that level of moment-to-moment experience through mindfulness and concentration, where we're really breaking things down and just seeing them arising and passing, we experience that much more vividly. I'll sit down and it's sort of like opening up the doors—who knows what's going to happen? It's all a show.

And really, our life is like that. How often in your work, no matter how much we have to plan and carry out specific projects, and we have a real sense of what we want to happen and a projected sense of what we really think will happen—but we don't know. It's completely out of control. And if we're so solidified around "this is what I think, this is what's going to happen," and we can't think of alternatives, we get really thrown off when something totally other happens.

Or it should be so still and silent here—and then how about when out of nowhere came that jet yesterday?

What's this doing here? It's not allowed in the wilderness. Who knows?

I used to go through phases of thinking, how long do I think I'm going to live in a country that's relatively peaceful and not at war? I mean, I just assume I'm not going to wake up to machine gun fire. And this might seem kind of crazy, but actually, I don't know. We never really know. We never really know—we could have an aneurysm and just drop dead. We never really know. And that's the truth of things.

Some part of our psyche really hates that, really doesn't want to live in this ever-present insecurity, this sense of not knowing. And I think the kind of bottom-line place that our psyche comes to rest, looking for some place of security, is this sense of self. It's the one thing that, if we don't look too closely, feels like it's always here. I know I'm me. I mean, everything's changing—I look really different than I did when I was eight—but I know I'm me. And I feel the same. I relate from my memories. I recognize people when I see them again, usually. It's this sense of a place to rest.

There's something that can be really scary to our conditioned mind, to think that there is no place to rest, that really ultimately we don't ever know. We want to have some solidity. And when one thing falls away, immediately we fall back onto another. Watch that in your practice. If there's something that you felt was really solid—the sense of the body—and you begin to sit and experience it as just shifting energies and nothing solid, it might be far out, but watch. The mind will create another view or another description or opinion. Okay, this is how it is. I'm a sense of shifting energy, moving around. That's me. And we've just fallen back into another level—somewhere to find security, somewhere to take a rest.

When I was helping teach a retreat in Yucca Valley in the desert of Southern California, outside of Palm Springs, a few years ago—and if you live in L.A., you know this experience—while we were there on the retreat, we had a couple of earthquakes. One kind of medium in the middle of a talk, and then a stronger one a couple of hours later, like a six-point-something earthquake.

Well, the earthquake itself, since I had never been in one, was actually kind of interesting. Franz and I were standing outside and you could kind of see the ground roll—explosions in the distance and the sound. It was like, wow, scary. It does something definitely to the body, but it's sort of far out. And then it stopped. It's okay. Well, that was neat. That's fine.

But what didn't stop was a series of aftershocks, like every three minutes, every five minutes for the next—at least twenty-four hours—and then with decreasing frequency for the rest of the retreat. And where I had felt like I really handled it with great equanimity, very present, seeing things change, no attachment—by the end of the night of aftershocks every three minutes, and of course the radio always says, "Twenty-five percent chance of the big one coming in the next three days"—so that just puts that in your mind. Is this an aftershock or is this the big one? You can't just say aftershock. By the end of like twelve hours of that, my nerves were a wreck. Every time the shock would start, our heater would start really rattling, so it couldn't just kind of pass unnoticed. We'd hear rattle, rattle, rattle every two minutes.

And I came out of it really deeply feeling this sense of how unquestioningly I had relied on the earth to be there for me—to be solid, to be someplace I could just rest. The worst that can happen, you can just fall on the earth. And to viscerally get it over and over—sorry, not that one either.

It really touches into this sense of anattā, of not-self, and the fear that comes from this ongoing insecurity. Kind of, not franticness, but that the mind wants to find somewhere. It's not okay hanging out in nowhere, needing to take a stand.

But actually it's not even the movement. It's not the not being able to take a stand that's the problem.

It's not the never knowing or the unknown that creates difficulty. The problem is that sense of "I" that's there in the midst of the unknown—that I which arises, clinging to whatever it can find, positing a need for security. The aftershocks weren't the problem. What they were doing to me was the problem. "Where am I going to find security?" was the problem.

When we're just opening into the moment as it is, there's no problem. When you were out today, if you had even one moment where it was just pure beingness—maybe it was hearing, maybe it was smelling, maybe it was warmth—where there was no discursive description, no trying to figure anything out, no attempting to name the species of birds, just simple being... in that moment, where's the problem? There's no needing to know what's going to happen next. There's no referring back to someone it's happening to. There's no needing to know what happened before. It's just this moment.

Without this obsessive, ongoing referring back of every sense experience to a sense of self—with just the pure experience—there isn't any problem. And whatever needs to occur in the next moment, the next moment occurs. If there's some response that needs to happen, that also occurs. We don't need to figure it all out ahead of time.

This doesn't mean that pure being prevents action, which is one of the questions that comes up often: "If there's no self, then how am I ever going to do anything? Who's going to do things?" We can talk about this sense of pure being and someone will ask, "Well, that's really nice, but what about if it starts to rain and there's lightning and you have to get up and go inside?"

Actually, the two have nothing to do with each other. There's a sense of being, and then there's a sense of being with lightning, and then there's a sense of a thought arising: "It could kill me. I think I'll go inside." That can be done with or without clinging to a sense of self. It can just be clear seeing.

This sense of self... faith is what can over and over give us the confidence and the trust to be willing to meet experience with this quality of not knowing. And the quality of not knowing will let us investigate—not with thinking, but with presence—in a much more open way. We look at the data freshly, so to speak, without having interpreted it before we've even perceived it.

When we begin to explore the sense of I, of mine—even the thought of not clinging to something as a sense of I or mine—it can really shake up that deepest resting place. I think that's why often, in or out of formal practice, when in a space of awareness you touch a deep place where there's viscerally, intuitively getting it—"Oh, there really isn't any need"—what often comes up is fear. It's a natural response to losing something we've actually never had in the first place, but something that we think we had. A sense of fear and even terror can arise.

And that's fine. We don't like fear very much, but the fear itself doesn't mean that something's wrong. Often fear, as we touch it in our practice, is really more like a messenger saying, "Oh, we're moving into

unknown territory." Rather than being afraid of the fear, with some confidence and clarity of practice, we can just meet the fear as another arising emotion, be with it, see it come, see it go. We don't have to take it as a messenger of doom. We don't have to interpret it as something going wrong.

Fear often means something is going really right. We're hitting the place of our unquestioned assumptions and they're beginning to break down. We don't always understand that rationally, but that's what's going on.

I find it fascinating to use our practice in this way. It's one of the explorations I really love on retreat: to consciously use mindfulness to explore the actual sense of me or mine when it's arising in a moment. Everything I'm about to say comes from what I've discovered in my own exploration and from others, but I'm not offering it as another explanation. Hopefully it might spark some interest for you to look and explore on your own.

Never take any answer your mind arrives at—"This is what the self is" or "This isn't"—as the final resting place. If you can keep that interest alive, keep that childlike innocence, that trust, keep meeting the data, keep exploring without stopping in any assumption that now you know what the self is or isn't, you can really begin to look.

What we begin to see—what I begin to see—is that what seems so solid and unquestioned is actually nothing. We're not destroying the ego through our practice, not getting rid of the sense of self to substitute something else. We begin to see that what seemed so solid is nothing solid at all.

In touching a sense of anattā—the Pali word for no separate self—if we lose the sense of self, we don't lose anything. It's not that something changes and we can't function, because it's not there in the first place.

This is from a man named Nisargadatta Maharaj. He was an Indian wise man, a saint who died in the last decade. He said, "My actual experience is not different from yours, but it is my evaluation and attitude that differ. I see the same world as you, but not the same way." Everybody sees the world differently, through the idea she or he has of herself. As you think yourself to be, so you think the world to be. If you imagine yourself as separate from the world, the world will appear separate from you, and you will experience desire and fear.

It really is all our perceptions, our descriptions, and our imaginings—which is so hard to believe. And when we begin to really look and see this over and over, then what's really hard to believe is how powerful these inaccurate perceptions and imaginings and descriptions are. So amazingly powerful. It really takes this willingness to keep looking.

So we look, and we see that when you have this feeling of "I," of "mine"—however it manifests—it might just be the thought "I'm really hungry," or "I'm bored now," "I wish this talk would end," "I wonder what I'm going to do tomorrow," "My knee hurts." It doesn't matter how. But when we have that sense, when you notice it there, rather than focusing on the object, see if you can—and your mind needs to be a little

quiet for this, obviously—see if you can turn your attention back on that "I" or "mine." The actual experiential feeling or thought or emotion, whatever it is.

What in that moment are you calling "mine"? We might be focused on "I'm hungry." We might actually be focused on the feeling of hunger or wanting food, but that might not be the actual sense of "I who am hungry." And sometimes we're so used to that "I" feeling, it just feels like it's always there, so we overlook it.

When your mind's a little quiet, it can be really wonderful—I really love it—turning around the attention and seeing, well, what's the "I"? Who's "I"? I don't mean investigating with thought, but with this sati, this mindfulness that just lands right on that feeling of "I" to see what it is.

We begin to see that the sense of "I" or "mine," the birth of self, is arising and passing moment to moment. There isn't anything that lasts—this thing we thought was unchanging. Buddhadasa, who was quite a remarkable Thai meditation master, says the self is merely a condition that arises when there is grasping and clinging in the mind. That's all it is. And in my experience so far—which I've not come to the end of—so far that's really true.

So when there's that sense of "I"—I'm hungry, I want this, this hurts, I want this to go away—turn around and see what's the experience that's being grasped and clung to. And don't even assume it's being grasped and clung to because I say it. Turn around and feel and see.

Every time that sense of "I" arises, there's a moment of sense contact. Maybe there's a smell happening. There could be a grasping at that smell. There could be a thought: "Mmm, smells like pizza." And then there could be a thought: "Oh, I'm really hungry." So there's grasping arising with that sense contact. Turn the attention not to the thought of the pizza, but to "I," and see what it's landing on.

What I find is that each time I do that, it's a different actual momentary experience that is somehow being interpreted as "I." For example, when I say "I'm talking right now," there's this sense of "I." I turn toward my experience, and it's a sort of very vague physical sensation that I can't even quite locate. Sometimes it could be an image. Sometimes it could be an actual sensation of pain. Sometimes it could be a thought. I have a friend who said—not every time, but often—when he turned toward the sense of "I," it was as if he had this very subtle mental image of his face. And that was the "I," as if experience was coming out of that. I'm just giving examples. It could be anything.

But turning and looking—what's been really liberating for me is that each time, it's something different. There isn't, so far, some thing there, or some emotion, or some experience, or some anything that's "I."

And that's what gets really fascinating to begin to see. If you can sort of see it, if it's something that one can experience right away, it's an arising and passing phenomenon. There's no continuity to it. There's no ultimate validity. It's clearly not self. So just beginning to explore in this way.

Classically, and Joseph spoke about some of these last night so I just want to mention them briefly, in Buddhist psychology they talk about what makes up a person, so to speak—the different aspects of experience around which there tends to be this clutching, this identification, which is really just a contraction of grasping around an experience. There are five aspects that make up all our experience, any of which we might land on as saying "I" in a given moment.

There's the body, which Joseph said last night is obvious—sensations in the body, the whole sense of our body as a whole. What I found more subtle, which isn't actually body but if I don't look carefully I think of it as body, is the image of the body. So there might be a sensation, and over that, subtly, there's an image of me. And there's a sense of identification, of grasping—me, my, mine. And that's "I" in that moment. It can be very subtle.

I find often as I'm sitting, there's just sensation. And there would be no sense of self, no sense of body. It's as if sensations are coming and going in a vast space of awareness. And then there's this subtle background image of my body sitting here—just an image of this body. Not seeing that, in that moment for me, becomes a sense of Carol, a sense of self. It's as if it's a container placed over an experience that has no containment and has no location, but it gives a false sense of container. Anyway, that's just something to look at.

The second aspect of experience around which we often grasp a sense of self is what's called feeling tone. I spoke the other night about how each sense experience we experience as either pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, which can come in quite subtly. Usually with pleasant, we move right away to wanting. With unpleasant, we move to aversion. With neutral, we tend toward spacing out. But often we don't notice that feeling tone because it's quite subtle.

This is one of the five aggregates that make up what a human is, and we easily fail to notice it yet identify with it, cling to it. Say there's a pain in the knee, and it's unpleasant. You might really be mindful of the sensations, really seeing the sensation, and there's not a sense of "I am that sensation," but somehow there's a real sense of involvement and self-identification there. You can't quite figure out where. You're clear you're not the pain, but often the clutching is around that subtle feeling of unpleasantness, of pleasantness, of neutrality. I just mention that as something else to notice—it creates that real sense of separation. Sometimes we don't notice that feeling.

The third aggregate, which Joseph mentioned last night, is consciousness—the knowing faculty, which seems ever-present and very subtle. That is easy to identify with. I think in some ways it's the last one we identify with because it's the most subtle and the most difficult to see as separate from me. I know hearing. I know that I'm paying attention. I know that there's unpleasant feeling. I know that there's awareness. It's easy to think of that as "I." So without saying whether it is or isn't, just notice if that's where this sense of I or me or mine is landing.

The fourth area is perception, which Joseph also talked about last night, and which is another really

fascinating area to explore. We can really begin to see, sometimes in simple ways, how easily we identify with our perception, take it as true. And then something else can come in and we realize our perception was totally whacked out—it had nothing to do with what was actually going on. But we would have defended it to the death.

"Yes, this is how it is."

Just a little example. The other night, about two nights ago, I was sleeping with the window open for the first time. And I woke up in the middle of the night with some weird stuff going on in my body—you know, that kind of weird, vulnerable, not-quite-put-all-the-pieces-together-yet state when you wake up in the middle of the night like that.

So I was just lying there, and I gradually became aware of this really loud roaring noise, just so loud coming in. My first thought was, "Well, that must be the river." But I didn't really have too much confidence in that thought or that perception. And it just seemed to get louder and louder with all these undertones and currents. And I thought, "I've been here for five days, and this is the third year I've been here. I never heard the river sounding like that. There's no way that can be the river."

Then I remembered when I was a nun for a while in Thailand. I was staying at one place that was in the forest, on a little small river deep down in a gorge. And one night, all of a sudden, just like that, this tiny little river got huge. It came all the way to the top of the gorge. It flooded our whole area and it made so much noise—it was unbelievable. So lying there that night, I thought, "Either there's some weird mechanical kind of plane or tank coming in here, or this river is flooding and it must be totally up to the porch by now." I was absolutely convinced of that because my perception was: I have never heard the river be that loud. Impossible.

So I finally went back to sleep, checked it out in the morning, walked out. Of course, the river's really loud. I mean, it's been there all along, really loud. I just never noticed it before. Now I can't walk down the road without hearing the river babbling. It's really there. It's really loud. I would have sworn on a stack of Bibles that that river never made a noise like that before.

So just that willingness to check our perceptions—to see where we can be so sure and so identified, and yet so wrong. That's what we're doing.

And the last area is everything else. I sometimes think that's kind of how the Buddha did it—all these categories, and then there's one that sort of lumps in so much. It's called mental formations. It includes what we're doing today in the instruction: intention, which is a really interesting one because you can see how subtle intention is. Intention to move, intention to do something, intention to direct the mind in a certain way, intention to come back to the breath, intention to move to hearing. And it's so easy to feel like that's me. Well, who's meditating? Who's paying attention to the breath? Where does this intention come from, if not from me? It's a very subtle place of investigation.

So again, just look and see when you identify with the intention. If that's you, then where are you when the intention goes away? Sit there and notice the intention to scratch your eyes, like Fred was saying. If that was you, then during those ten breaths when you didn't scratch, you were gone, right? And then you come back again, if that's how intention is us. But explore it.

This is where I mean don't stop. Return to intention. It feels so much like us, and there can be a tendency to stop really looking. We move into "Of course it's me. What else could it be? And where could this intention come from?" And we're back into that spinning mind of doubt again.

So exploring intention. And the other aspect I just want to mention of mental formations is, of course, our old friend thought. And thought is a really...

Sometimes we can see thought, obviously. It's a lot of what our practice is. But because thought can come so often and we get so used to it, we sometimes don't notice that the thoughts can turn into an ongoing commentary that is actually making up our sense of self. We're kind of describing ourselves to ourselves as we go through the day, telling ourselves different stories. If you stop and look, you might be telling yourself a lot of different stories about yourself. In a way, we're making it up as we go along.

But if we don't notice thought, there's this identification with certain ones. For instance, some might go through—"Wow, I'm really doing good. I'm really a far-out person"—and those kind of go by. Maybe we don't really identify with them too much. Then another one comes up: "I am such a schlump. I'll never be able to do this right. I'm too tight. I'm too this. I'm too that. I'm a failure." Those ones we might really buy into and believe and carry around with us through everything we do. "I don't wash the dishes right. I made a big clanging noise when I was serving myself. Everybody was looking at me. I'm not working mindfully enough. I'm moving too much in the hall." Not noticing all the times in between when these thoughts aren't happening, when there's no sense of self at all, but stringing them together and telling ourselves this self-story until it gets really solid.

One time, a couple years ago, I was on a two-month retreat, and something got really clear to me. I had just seen a movie right before the retreat—and if you can avoid that, or listening to music just before a retreat, I'd advise avoiding it unless you want to really watch the replays for a long time. So I had seen *The Fugitive*. At least it wasn't too bad of a movie; it could have been worse. But I'd be sitting there and I'd be getting flashes of scenes and dialogue from *The Fugitive*—not in order, of course, jumping forward and back in time. Then after a while it would switch and the Carol movie would come on. It would be flashes of memory and future planning and images of myself, things that happened, forward and back in time.

At some point it hit me. It wasn't like there was a correlation, like a simile. They were exactly the same. There wasn't any difference. It wasn't that the Carol story was more real at that moment than the flashes of memory from *The Fugitive*—not at all. It was just images coming up and thoughts. But there were particular ones where there was a sense of grasping, a sense of identification around them. And so I made that Carol. I didn't think I was—I can't remember his name—but I didn't think that character was who I

was. I knew that was a movie. Well, guess what? So is the other. It doesn't mean that I don't know what happened in the past or that I can't relate, but in that moment, what was really happening was just images arising, thoughts arising, emotions arising and passing. And whether it was about Carol or what's-his-name, it really wasn't any different.

And that's what we're doing all the time. We're telling ourselves stories. There's thoughts. We don't notice which ones we clutch at and make a story of and which ones go by. So pay attention. See which ones there's this grasping of self around and which ones go by. Just because there's a grasping sense of self around some thoughts, that doesn't necessarily make them true. I want to point that out. In fact, often—not with everybody, but for a lot of people I talk to in retreats—the tendency can be to really identify with the negative ones, the negative self-images, the ways we're not good enough, our failings.

And if something beautiful happens or we have some beautiful experience—"I'm really a very kind person"—don't get too carried away with yourself. The "mine" will come in right away: "Remember when you did this and you didn't give that." And "Oh yeah, that's right. Thank you for bringing me back to truth." Because we're buying into a particular story. It's all just thoughts. Imagine the freedom, the spaciousness of not having to grasp and solidify around any of them.

This is another way we can come at this exploration of the sense of self. The way I've been talking is really the way of precision—being with the breath with precision, bringing your attention into the experience of "I" or "mine" with precision. We can also approach it from the way of spaciousness, sort of like being with hearing. At times we tune into whatever word you want to use—spaciousness, or awareness, or emptiness, which is really the more classic term. Just emptiness. Things arise and pass. Emptiness doesn't mean nothing happening, but it's empty of clinging, empty of aversion and grasping, empty of self.

And in that, without looking for anything—sort of like Joseph was saying with the cars going by, you're not looking for anything—but when this sudden sense of grasping, the sense of clinging, the emergence of self arises, you really can't help but notice it when you're tuning into the emptiness.

I'll give an example. One time I was on a self-retreat in a really lovely spot in California. I was sitting high up on a hill, sort of like you were doing today, hopefully—just sitting and being really aware with my eyes open. Just spaciousness and peace, everything coming and going, really beautiful, no thoughts of me, just presence. And some turkey vultures came flying out really close because I was high up. Just another arising experience—spaciousness, peace. Of course, somewhere in it, a thought arose: "This is really far out. I'm so empty. I'm so spacious." But that came and went too.

And more turkey vultures came, and they were circling. All of a sudden, they were circling right over me and getting closer and closer. And suddenly the thought arose: "I'm the thing they're circling. They think I'm dead." I had this moment of genuine panic. It only lasted a moment, but it was really—everything I could do, I almost stood up and screamed, "I'm alive! I'm alive!"

It was really interesting. In that moment, emptiness, spaciousness, no sense of self, real freedom and ease—it vanished, just like that. Total contraction. Solid sense of me and other, fear, something to do.

That's how it is. When we're letting ourselves attune to the emptiness, when it's present, we can notice it. Sometimes we can't notice it—there's just too much going on, or there's too much clinging, too much stuff. But other times, when it's a little more quiet or there's not a particular identification with anything, just open up and let yourself tune in to the emptiness. Get comfortable with it.

Buddhadasa talks about this often as a way of practice. It's not like we're in total cessation of all suffering—I'm not talking about ultimate enlightenment—but just inclining to emptiness. As he says, we experience in our ordinary day-to-day life many, many moments of this emptiness. Often we just don't notice them, but we can begin to incline the awareness to them. Not to do anything, not to be "me," not to grasp it—just to get more comfortable and more content with that ease, with that emptiness.

And in that, when the sense of grasping at some experience arises, when the sense of self is born in a moment, it's really pretty obvious. It's not something we have to fight. It's just really interesting to see how it can go from a moment of total ease to a moment of complete panic and fear that I'm going to be attacked by turkey vultures. And the next moment, it can all go again.

So really seeing the arising and passing of this sense of self, not being content to stop anywhere, but continuing to explore, watching it come, watching it go. And in each experience of that, the old conditioning, the old assumptions begin to weaken. Without logically knowing it, we begin to experience much more ease with what comes and goes in our life, with what comes and goes in our emotions, with what comes and goes as experience. Just an ease and a dancing with things.

It's not that stuff disappears. But it's that sense of "I," that constant self-referencing, that begins to ease—that we don't take so seriously, that we see through altogether. And in that comes a real sense of joy and dancing with life.

I want to end with this from a Tibetan Lama:

Happiness cannot be found through great effort and willpower, but is already there in relaxation and letting go. Don't strain yourself. There's nothing to do. Whatever arises in the mind has no importance at all because it has no reality whatsoever. Don't become attached to it. Don't pass judgment. Let the game happen on its own, springing up and falling back without changing anything, and all will vanish and reappear without end. Wanting to grasp the ungraspable, you exhaust yourself in vain. As soon as you relax this grasping, space is there—open, inviting, and comfortable. Nothing to do, nothing to force, nothing to want, and everything happens by itself.

So let's just do nothing quietly for a few moments.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.