Anattā Or How The Sense Of Self Is Created

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:01:54

Tonight I'd like to talk about demystifying the sense of self, investigating the sense of self.

I was reminded of a poem. I'm not sure I remember it exactly correctly, but the day reminded me of it: "The winds of change blow across emptiness. Whom can they harm?"

That's really how I felt today. The difference between the sense of self and no sense of self—which can both be present from moment to moment, either one—is this: when I was resistant and cold and pulled in and aversive, there was self, clinging, identified. And when the winds were just blowing across emptiness, there was no problem. That could change from moment to moment.

When James directed us to notice clinging, the movement of clinging or grasping, and the moments of non-clinging, of non-grasping—this is so key to our coming to live in freedom, because the ultimate clinging, the kind of core grasping if you want to think about it that way, is clinging to the sense of I and mine.

I want to talk about this not in an intellectual or philosophical way, but in a way of really directing our investigative attention into what we're calling "me," "I," or "mine" in any particular moment of experience. Just to meet that with attention rather than living in assumptions.

I want to use as a framework the way that Ajahn Buddhadasa talked about this particular issue of emptiness. In one of the suttas, someone asked the Buddha to just tell him, basically in one phrase, what is it that liberated ones know that I don't know? Just lay it out. And he said, okay, what they know is that nothing is worth clinging to. Nothing whatsoever is to be clung to as I or mine. That's what they know and what we don't quite totally get yet.

But talking about anattā or no-self or emptiness—the usual translation of the word suññatā—doesn't have to be an esoteric philosophical experience. As a friend of mine often reminds us, the Buddha did not teach anattā or anything to create another philosophy or to make occasions for more philosophical discussions. He taught it for our freedom from suffering and confusion.

I hope that what we can do is take the fear out of the concept of anattā, out of no-self or self. Take the hatred out of the idea of self as something we have to destroy, and just bring our attention to what's actually happening. We find out it's really not such a big deal. We can explore this on a moment-to-moment basis.

I want to say a little bit about Ajahn Buddhadasa because I found him quite inspiring. He died in 1993. He

was one of the most famous Thai forest monks, meditation teachers, and scholars. He founded a forest monastery in southeastern Thailand. He was really quite radical, even up until the time he died—radical for Thai Theravada Buddhism.

For example, he had in his monastery what was called a spiritual theater, sort of like a museum, and it had all different kinds of paintings and artwork. It had the ten Zen ox-herding pictures in it. I think you have to have been in Thailand and know how provincial Thai Theravada Buddhism can sometimes be to see that it was really quite unusual for a renowned abbot to have Zen material in his monastery.

In his book *Heartwood of the Bodhi Tree*—which is a really good book, and I recommend it if you want to read more about recognizing the sense of self and emptiness—he talks about how in the 1930s, when he first began his teachings, emptiness or anattā was considered among the sangha, among the monks and nuns, something you didn't really teach to laypeople because they couldn't get it. It was sort of saved for people who were really committed and had all the time to look at it.

And he said, you know, that's baloney. Okay, maybe he didn't use the word baloney, but something to that effect. That's ridiculous.

I can see in us teaching here subtle remnants of that attitude. We kept discussing: Should I give this talk on anattā tonight, or what's the right night of the retreat? Is this too late because soon it will be over and people might get disturbed? And it's like—hey, this is the core of freedom in this teaching, and we're worried that you might get a little bit disturbed or something if you hear it? What's going on?

So I really want to talk about this, because for me this is the core point of freedom. You don't have to wait for some profound dissolution experience in meditation to begin to develop, and to continue to develop, a deep understanding that is not just of the intellect—to really experience emptiness, to experience the birth and death of the sense of self in any moment. This can be our practice on retreat, off retreat, as long as we're willing to pay attention.

That's what I want to talk about tonight.

I'm going to stick with "emptiness." Emptiness meaning that any particular moment of experience is empty of self, empty of me and mine. This is not an esoteric, out-of-body, incredibly out-there experience necessarily. It's truly natural and normal. In fact, all of us experience many, many moments of this every day. We just don't notice it most of the time.

The nature of mind—big mind, you could say, though "mind" is a hard word to use—the nature of who we are is sometimes referred to as awareness. There's no one word that can really describe or encapsulate it. But when we're not distracted, when we're not becoming involved in arising appearances with our ideas and reactions, when we're not basically clinging to whatever is happening, getting fixated on and involved in whatever is happening—when we're not distracted in that way, when we're just awake and present, there's no feeling in that moment of I or mine. It's just this. Those moments when things are just so

peaceful—that is a moment like that.

And we can recognize this over and over. More often, what we recognize is the ways that we get distracted from this emptiness, if you want to call it that. Some sense experience arises and we get all involved in some concoction of liking and disliking, what it means, how I was when I was five, what's going to happen next—and it's just a sound. We get all involved in that. Or we think, "Why am I doing this? Why does this have to happen? Why can't I just be with the sound? It's so simple. It's just a sound." We notice that, but quite often we don't notice when that's not happening.

The root of all this distraction, the clinging and the pushing away (which is really the flip side of clinging), is this false view of self—this clinging to any experience as I or mine. Buddhadasa calls it "I-ing and my-ing," which I really like because it's not a solid thing. It's an arising experience in any moment. Something arises and there's I-ing it or my-ing it. I like that.

Unexamined, if we don't really look, doesn't it feel like the sense of I is pretty much usually here? And it seems pretty steady. It seems like often the one thing that does not abide by the law of impermanence. It feels pretty solid—if we don't look.

So what we can do in this practice is take our mindfulness, our wise attention, our wisdom eye, and turn it back onto the experience of I or mine itself when we notice that it's present. That's what I want to talk about tonight, hopefully in a practical way.

One way of describing the sense of I, the way Ajahn Buddhadasa speaks of it, is so simple. He says the sense of self is merely a condition that arises when there is grasping and clinging in the mind. That's all. Grasping and clinging arises, sense of self arises. It's a condition that arises, and if it arises, you know what that means—it also passes, as soon as there isn't grasping and clinging in the mind. Or as a friend of mine puts it, describing his experience, "I want, I need, therefore I am." Very succinct.

So with mindfulness-wisdom, satipañña, truth-discerning awareness, we can begin and continue to recognize the arising and passing of this condition we call self. It's a different condition each time. There's nothing permanent. But we can begin to explore how it arises, how it is experienced when it's present, and how it passes. It really takes a lot of the oomph out of it. It takes a lot of the fear, a lot of the solidity out of this so-called sense of self to begin to explore it, because it's just like any other arising appearance. It's just like some thought arising, some emotion arising. It just comes and goes. It's nothing in particular.

So, just an example of the birth of the sense of self in a moment. I was on retreat last year—and this is not particularly a retreat experience; this is how it happens all the time. It was at IMS in Barre, and the way the mealtimes work there is much like here. You walk in, get your plates, and there's a whole big shelf of mugs that have been collected from all the people who leave mugs, so they're all different. For weeks I would just come in, take a mug, get my tea. But for some reason, this particular morning, the mug I picked was just really nice. It was this lovely color green, and it fit so nicely in my hand.

And in short, somewhere as I was drinking my tea and feeling, "Oh, this is really pleasant, this is really pleasant," boom—a real sense of attachment to that pleasant feeling, and then to that mug, came in. It's just this mundane. And in that was the birth of me—me and my mug. That's it. I-ing and my-ing right there.

It wasn't too much suffering at the moment. We don't really notice it then; we're just noticing the pleasure at that point. But that was the birth of the self with the birth of clinging.

This is the dependent origination that the Buddha talked about, and I'm not going to go into it fully—it's really the core of his teaching of how, with ignorance and the arising of experience, we end up in suffering in a moment. There's ignorance, and then with sense contact there's a sense door, eye. There's a sense object, the mug. There's consciousness, awareness of that. Those come together. There's contact—I'm seeing the nice green mug. There's pleasant feeling. There's craving first—I like it. There's clinging—I want it. In fact, I want it in the next meal that I have. And that leads to, boom, birth of self. Suffering. Death, because what's born has to die. That's the dependent origination. That's the birth of self in any particular moment.

Next time it happens to you—of course it's not happening to you, is it? It's just happening out of emptiness. Next time there's that birth of that feeling of self, turn your attention on and feel it. Just be with the experience. I can describe how it is in this mind and body; don't then transplant that onto you.

For example, that "me and my mug"—a sense of contraction, a sense of grasping and clinging that is a tightness, a kind of limitation. It narrows the consciousness. What had been just relaxed, open, and free was now this mug. Everything else is sort of blotted out. Other people are in the way of my getting this mug the next time I come in to the meal. And in fact, when I finished the meal, I really started thinking, "Okay, maybe I should save it." Some people save mugs, and they're all hidden behind the plants and behind the curtains and everything. And I did have the grace to say, "Okay, forget that, Carol," and I put it back.

But then you see, birth of self leads to more wanting, more activity, more plotting and scheming. And I managed to—next time I came, I really looked. And there it was, my mug, and I grabbed it. I said, "Oh good, I have it." But it wasn't really so pleasant. In fact, the narrowness, the constriction of this sense of me, the sense of mine, was actually quite unpleasant. And I saw, "You know what? I don't need this." And I just put it down. In that moment was the death of self. And again, there was expansiveness, ease, just what is.

That's a simple example, but it happens hundreds and hundreds of times in any day. And instead of just feeling victimized, or not noticing it, or getting involved in what we can do to continue with the pleasantness, we can simply notice that process—that contact, that wanting, the birth of self, I-ing and my-ing. And when the clinging ends, as it will for that particular time—it will definitely end, it will disappear—it's really important to notice that as well, because then we begin to realize that the perception

of continuity of self is an illusion.

So in that moment of putting down the mug, there's just sitting or hearing, sensation, no particular sense of self. There's just that shunyata, that emptiness at that moment. Notice that. Often we don't. Often we just kind of say, "Okay," and almost as if we dull out—

The ignorance comes in until the next birth of self arises—something else to react against or into, something to do or create, some intensity to grasp. But this emptiness is often just that. And it's easy to not really be awake there. There's no grasping in that moment. There's no aversion in that moment. But there also needs to be no delusion in that moment—delusion in the form of just dulling out and not noticing. Ah, just this. And it doesn't really matter what "this" is.

I want to talk some more about exploring this. I'm using the word "sense," but the sense or the feeling—when there comes an awareness that "I" or "mine" is being born or is present in a particular moment of experience, we can turn the awareness back onto that experience itself. Not thinking about it, not trying to analyze "what is this," but really turning the attention around: What is this "I"? What am I calling "I" in this moment? What is being clung to in this moment?

Because clinging is just a habit of mind. And with truth-discerning awareness, with mindfulness-wisdom, when we notice it—as I think was mentioned either this morning or last night—when you're aware of clinging, in that moment of mindfulness, actually clinging isn't happening. It's almost like we're observing the moment before, it's so fast. But in that moment, clinging is not being perpetuated. "I" is not being perpetuated. Turn around and see that. The habit can be seen through.

So I just want to give examples of some of the basic experiences we cling to. It's not a comprehensive list, and I hope I don't get too detailed. Some of it we can see in all times of our life, on retreat and off retreat. Some of it is a little more subtle, and the mind needs to be a little quiet to notice.

The obvious first experience we cling to in a large way is what we would call the body. But to take it into our actual experience, out of the realm of idea—when we're clinging to "my body," what is actually the experience of clinging, of what is being clung to? When you turn and look at it, it kind of deconstructs the sense of self.

Let me give you a couple of examples. You're sitting with your eyes closed and there's a pain in your knee. The attention might go there, and it's like, "a twinging pain in my knee." That's the experience. And there might be some clinging to wanting it to be better, or to the sense of "my knee." Certainly it feels like my body—whether it's "my body" or "I am the body," either one. There's some sense of I-ing and my-ing in that.

But really look: What is being called "my body," "my knee" at that moment when I turn my attention? Remember, you're sitting with your eyes closed and there's a twinge. How do you even know where it is in space? Never mind that it's a knee—what is giving you that information?

When I look at my experience, there's a twinge. And this is how it is for me; it might be different for you. I'm just inviting you to look with attention. There's a twinge, and then it's almost as if there's a mental image of my body, you know, with a little emphasis on the area of the knee. Although it's actually not here—it's like a little image placed somewhere, located down there. But it's all just mental image. It's actually nothing to do with body at all. It's mentality. And then there's a physical sensation, twinge. It might be pleasant, it might be unpleasant.

I don't know if this is too complicated, but just look the next time you're saying, "My back hurts," or "I have a headache." Even if your eyes are open, you can't see your back. You can feel a sensation, and there might be a sense of where it is. You might feel parts of your whole body, but really it's like that Big Mind meditation we did the other morning.

If you really tune in, the sensations are just floating in the space of awareness, and then there's this concept of "my body" put on top of it. There's nothing wrong with that. It's just that when we cling to that concept and don't see it, we're in this identification of "this is me, this is my body." And what's actually happening is sensation, mental image, pleasant or unpleasant, and clinging to one or all of the above.

Don't think about it. Really don't think about it. I'm just saying these things to point you back to your experience. Thinking about it completely takes you away. So as soon as you feel confused by something I'm saying, forget it. I'm serious. Let your attention come back to your actual experience. Because what keeps this sense of me and mine going is thinking about it and not realizing it's just thoughts. So just come back.

Like the wind today. When I feel, "Oh, I'm so cold. My hands are cold." I look down and my fingers have gone bone white. My body feels so contracted. I can't deal well with the cold. I'm so miserable. I'm so cold. But when I would just stop and open my attention and simply be with sensations—there was just sensations arising and passing, hearing arising and passing. That was it. Some of the sensations were pleasant. Some of them were unpleasant. And they change really rapidly. That was it. All the rest was thoughts, images, story concocted that I didn't see as thoughts and images, and there was clinging to it. That's largely how the sense of self is created moment to moment and carried on in time through thoughts and stories about it. And I'll say more about that in a minute.

Another aspect of experience that is often clung to, that feels like self and that we often don't notice because we don't look, is that quality of every sense experience that it's either pleasant or unpleasant or neutral. It's called vedanā in Pali, sometimes translated as feeling tone. It's what the Buddha called the second foundation of mindfulness.

So, for instance, I was talking about the cold sensations—experiencing them as unpleasant. Or perhaps there's a really nice pleasant sensation. You have a sitting and the breath is really smooth and deep and it's pleasant. And you're sort of aware of liking it. And you're aware, you're really saying, "I know this is going to change. I'm really not attached." And we're very sincere. But then the next sitting, everything's

chaos. And we find out that somehow we really were attached. And we don't quite know where the clinging was. Because often the clinging is not actually to the breath—it's to the pleasant feeling that goes along with it. Each slow breath had a pleasant feeling. It's subtle. We often don't notice that, and we get attached to the pleasantness or aversive to the unpleasantness.

That's why there's often an emphasis to notice, at times when it's obvious, that aspect of experience. Like you sit in the sun—warmth, warmth, liking. Notice just the pleasant quality. Just notice it, that's all. Then you might see how the clinging comes into the pleasantness itself.

Again, Buddhadasa speaks a great deal about what a useful practice it is in our daily life to notice the wave-like nature of pleasant feeling as we go through our daily experiences. There's so much that's pleasant. He says, how much pleasant feeling have you experienced in your life in just one day? So much. And how long has any of it lasted?

It lasts just like this. And then there's another pleasant feeling, or an unpleasant one. He asks, how much of our experience do we value by how pleasant it is? The more pleasant feeling something arouses in our experience, the better we think it is, the more we tend to value it.

Meditation is the opposite of this. That's why sometimes people say, "I don't know what I'm doing here again. I'm here for some reason, but it's been so hard." And it's really a sincere question, because generally, if something's unpleasant and difficult, we're out of here. But we keep coming back, even though it's difficult, and that doesn't sit with this general assumption that the more pleasant something is, the better it is.

But really watch this. The wave-like nature of pleasant—it comes and it goes, comes and it goes. Just to see that. Notice how often when the sense of "I" is there, when you just feel solid and here, if you turn the attention inward, quite often it's pleasant feeling that the clinging is around, even more than the actual experience that's engendering the pleasant feeling.

So we have aspects of the body, this feeling tone of pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral. Of course, a lot of clinging also arises to the aspect of our experience of mentality—thoughts and emotions. Obviously, with both thoughts and emotions, at times the clinging is so quick and subtle we don't even recognize it. How often does it just feel like "this emotion is me"? It's not that I even like this sadness or like this bliss. It often just feels like, "Well, this is just me. That's how it is." That's how close the clinging can be.

Thoughts and emotions can be difficult to notice as what the clinging is arising to because they come so quickly, they change so quickly, and they're so interconnected. Have you noticed that? How a thought gives rise to emotion, and as soon as you notice the emotion there are all these other thoughts, and then they give rise to another emotion, and it just keeps ricocheting off each other. Then there are a few sensations in there that give rise to unpleasantness and more emotions and thoughts, and it happens so fast that often it's really hard to turn your attention and ask, "Well, what is the clinging to?" or "Where is

this sense of self?" It just feels like me.

But at times, when the mind is a little quiet, we can actually watch how from a very mundane experience, this sense of self is created and gets solid in just that amount of time. Very mundane.

I remember one time I was doing walking meditation. One of those times when it's just walking—nothing going on, so nice. We like it like that. Just walking along, and I had a turtleneck on, and I just ran my finger under my turtleneck. I was aware of it—sensation, sensation—and just in that moment of running my finger there, a mental image arose. You know how you see yourself as if looking out from behind your eyes but seeing your body and imagining how you look doing that? Such a little, neutral kind of experience.

But as soon as I'm doing that—that mental image, which is all fine, there was no particular clinging—then a sense of almost seeing myself through someone else's eyes, and the unspoken thought: "I wonder what I look like. Do I look like a typical yogi schlump, or am I looking kind of okay?" And in that moment—this is just a little thing, not like a huge insecurity—just like that. Clump. Clinging. Birth of "I," my image, myself, my body. So fast and so subtle.

None of those things in themselves are a problem. It's just when there's clinging to that—"What do people think of me?"—that thought and that fear, then there's a sense of self. For me, with the sense of self there comes a feeling of contraction, of solidity almost, that wasn't there the moment before. And it's all the same experiences—the image, the sensation, the thought. The sense of self is like a solidifying of that.

No experience in itself is any problem or necessarily has to be clung to or identified with. It really doesn't matter what the experience is. I'll give you an example of that—how sensations, thoughts, emotions, and the stories we tell in thoughts really coagulate the sense of self, and how in any moment we can cut through it.

I think this was a different retreat. I was sitting, pretty quiet, in an open kind of space—not super concentrated, just being with things. And just noting: hearing, hearing, tickling, tickling, sensing, sensing, coughing, coughing, tickling, tickling, tickling, tickling... "Oh my God, this is bronchitis."

And that thought—"Oh my God, this is bronchitis"—was really clung to. "I" arose strongly in that moment. I had had bronchitis quite severely about two months previously and had been quite sick. As soon as that thought was clung to, panic arose, and that was clung to—the future and my plans. "I don't have time for this. I've got things to do. I can't get sick again. And I'm on retreat! No, no, no..." It really went wild.

And then I thought: what's really happening here? Tickling, tickling. Coughing, coughing. Thinking, thinking. That was it.

And the whole thing went away. I mean, not the tickling, not the coughing—but the panic, the fear, the dreadful illness, my life falling apart. It was really just what it was.

And then I could see the thoughts arise again, the panic again. Well, what am I going to do about it? Should I go to the doctor? And all of that. Okay, just come back to the bare experience. And the whole self would subside again.

Buddhadasa has a phrase which he actually uses in a different context, but I like it here: *volunteering for suffering*. And I saw in that moment—it was almost like a choice—yes, I'm going to really go into this "oh my God, it's bronchitis" mode, and suffer. Because at any moment the attention can come back and just be with tickling, tickling, thinking, thinking, and there's no problem.

This doesn't mean that we become non-functional in the world. I know this is one of the questions that often comes up. If everything's just tickling, tickling, thinking, thinking, then how do we function? How do we take care of ourselves?

Well, actually, when the sitting ended and I could just be with what was there—tickling, tickling, kind of noticed the experience—I said, you know what? It is bronchitis. But that was just a recognition. It didn't have all the extra stuff along with it at all. You can recognize something with still no particular sense of self, just a recognition of conditions, a perception. Oh yes, these things put together make bronchitis. And I went and saw the doctor and got the antibiotics and it was fine.

So actually, the functioning is much more sane and appropriate when we're not lost in this I-ing and my-ing and we're just present with experience. Don't worry that you're somehow going to be off in the ozone, lost in emptiness when there's no sense of self. It's actually just the reverse—because there isn't any self, you can't lose it. There isn't a self here. It's not like we're getting rid of something. Nothing changes but that we begin to recognize what's actually happening anyway. So it just makes things a lot easier. It makes things a lot simpler.

Emotions are tricky because, for many of us, certain emotions somehow feel much more *me* than others. Some seem much more solid, and when they come—oh, that's that anxiety, that's really the core of my being. I may not always be anxious; once in a while I can see it go. But by golly, I know it's going to come back as soon as I'm in any particular situation, because that's really who I am. So I can be mindful of it, I can be with it, I can really accept it, but there's still some subtle clinging of I or mine to that particular emotion—whether it's judgment or love or anxiety or fear or whatever it happens to be.

As we've said over and over, it's really helpful to notice the beginnings and endings, as with everything, but particularly with the emotions that you feel are very sticky. Just notice that there are gaps. Someone will come into an interview having been in a very painful, difficult time with particular emotions—really, really working with it very well, but it's hard. And in talking about it and describing it, they kind of realize, oh, but actually, it's not here at all right now. And it can seem a little puzzling, even as it's a relief, because it seems so solid, so much part of who we are.

One way I like to turn the attention back and explore that sense of clinging, that sense of selfing around an

emotion, is to notice the difference when an emotion is just what it is—there's sadness or anxiety or judgment or happiness, just what it is. The emotion itself is not a problem. There doesn't have to be clinging or a sense of self. And then notice the difference when it's not just sadness but *my* sadness, or *I'm* sad. There's a little extra—that's the clinging. It has a slightly different quality, a different mental and physical experience.

So just explore that for yourself. You learn to tell, in a way, when sadness is just that—just moving through the space of awareness like a cloud—and when sadness has become clung to, when an I has arisen as an object, as a being in that moment. It's noticing the birth of self as emotion.

Just a couple of other aspects of experience I want to mention briefly, to explore.

They're somewhat subtle, but one that is really easily clung to, because it's often not even recognized, is this experience of intention. The intention that gives rise to speech, that gives rise to any particular action.

We've spoken about it some, especially if you were here for both retreats. But intention is—you could call it the urge that arises that lets the arm move. We couldn't move without that. It's a mental experience that, as it were, gives the signal for the arm to move, for the voice to come out, for the thoughts to form, for me to say what I want to say.

We often explore this. People will talk about it in sittings or during the walking, where somehow there's an itch and they're really aware, and all of a sudden they're scratching. They say, "I don't know how that happened. I really didn't mean to scratch, but somehow it was there. I kind of just spaced out for a moment and scratching happened." Or we're in walking meditation, feeling really present, and the next thing you know, you're in the cafeteria having a cup of tea. And you think, "How did I get here? I was really into the walking meditation." Those are intentions that weren't recognized.

This happens all the time. There are intentions arising every moment. We're never going to recognize them all—don't even try. You'll make yourself crazy. But we can notice the big ones. Some intention got you to come here. At the end of the sitting, an intention arises to stand up.

You can play with it at times. Before you stand up, feel the intention to stand up and then don't do it. Feel it again and then don't do it. It's kind of fun. Or with an itch—you're just about to scratch and then you don't. You're just about to and then you don't. It's a way to get that sense of what an intention is. And then see how just one moment of not noticing and—wham—we're up there scratching.

So that's just to get the feeling of intention. Intention is just another effect arising from a previous cause. It's just part of cause and effect. There's an itch, an unpleasant sensation. There's a thought, "I don't like this." There's the intention to scratch, which leads to the movement, which leads to the scratching, which leads to the intention to think, "Oh, I blew it. I should have been mindful." It's just all a series of cause and effect.

But it's really common that we think, "What do you mean? Who's scratching? I'm scratching. Whose idea was it to scratch? Mine." Whenever there's a talk about intention at the three-month course, or about anattā, you can almost bet money that somebody the next day will say, "If there's no self, who had the intention to come to this retreat? If there's no self, who has the intention to stand up?"

The classical answer is: nobody. Intention just arises out of causes and in itself becomes a cause for another effect. It's just a chain of appearances arising. A sensation, an intention, a movement, a sensation, a thought, an intention. They're all just cause and effect arising and passing, arising and passing.

The "I," that clinging—when clinging, which is just another effect arising from cause... we also cling to clinging. When the clinging to that intention arises—see, this is kind of subtle—but it's that feeling of, "Of course I'm the one standing up." This is another really good one not to think about. No, I'm serious.

Intention, and the next one I'm going to mention, and then I'll say a little thing about both of them regarding not thinking about it. The next piece is: who's aware? Who is mindful? Mindfulness arises in a moment. "I'm aware of the intention to stand up, the intention to scratch." Awareness happens. It's very easy for this subtle clinging of "my awareness" or "I am awareness" to arise.

And it's so subtle it won't even probably feel like clinging. But doesn't it really feel like, if I said "who's aware?" well, I am, obviously.

When I say don't think about it—either this, intention, or awareness—it's because it's the thinking about it that actually seems to solidify that birth of self. What do you mean, I'm not intention? How does that work? Well, if I'm not intention, then what is it? And if I'm not aware, then what is awareness? How can awareness just arise? And then we start thinking. And the clinging is coming in to those thoughts. The self, the "I-ing," is happening around those thoughts. And we think ourselves into a really solid sense of self.

Remember in the last retreat—and this happens every time—after the talk on anatta, a lot of people were coming in saying, "I've got to get it, I've got to get this." And just that is the clinging to thinking that makes the self seem so solid, like it's something we'll never see through. In that moment, no.

Whenever you notice that sense of self, though, rather than trying to think your way out of it, just turn the attention—never mind who's turning the attention—just let an intention arise from a memory arising of having heard these words. The intention arises, the attention turns back on the experience of, "Oh, I was thinking this," and just see what that experience is in that moment. Very simply, just explore it. Drop into that experience with wise attention.

I find that when I'm on a long retreat and using noting, this is a note I have. The note is actually "self." I tried to explain this to Sayadaw U Pandita once, and boy, it really didn't work. He just got hysterical. "Ha ha, you think there's a self! Ha ha ha, you know self!" It really didn't go anywhere.

What I actually do is when I feel that sense—that without looking one would call self—I turn the attention

back on it, I note it as "self," but I connect with what the attention actually finds. What's the real experience? And guess what? It's always just one of the six sense experiences. Maybe it's pressure. Maybe it's an image. Maybe it's a thought. Maybe it's tingling. Maybe it's an emotion. Maybe it's a memory. It's usually almost always something different, but it's just an arising momentary appearance that's also passing in that moment. It's really like nothing. It's nothing special. And each time we turn our attention there, it's no big deal. You just see it. It passes. The next thing arises.

To do this over and over—it's really in activity, in our daily life, in conversation. Whenever you begin to notice that sense of self, just bring the attention there and see what's truly there. Birth and death of self many, many times in one day.

So rather than trying to get rid of self, we simply begin to see through its illusory nature over and over and over. And the heart and mind just naturally begins to incline to stillness—the stillness of not needing to get so reactively involved in experience.

So, nothing whatsoever should be clung to as I or mine. That means nothing whatsoever. It doesn't mean nothing except the teachings, or nothing except this idea I have, or nothing except views of practice, or sense of self, or anything. It means nothing. Whatever's arising in a moment, it's not worth clinging to. It's the clinging that creates the suffering.

And it's so poignant, because the clinging is really in service of wanting to find completion.

And it's the clinging that blinds us to the completion and ease that's already here—always here—when there's a heart and mind of no clinging and vivid wakefulness.

So it's also true. Buddhadasa again: "If at any moment any person has a mind empty of clinging to I and mine, in any moment, even if only for an instant, at that moment it means that the heart, the mind has realized emptiness." Even if only for an instant. And that can be very powerful.

I know for years I was waiting because I thought when the heart realizes emptiness, all these lights go off and that's it—it's realized it forever. Done. Finished. And it's not. So I'm sorry to say. But actually, once I got rid of that idea, you see that the heart can recognize emptiness, the mind can rest in emptiness, moments—many, many, many moments in any day. And it does. And so our practice is to continue to recognize this. Not necessarily anything exciting. But it's just as valid a way of recognizing emptiness, no self—this recognizing the birth of the sense of self out of the emptiness and the death of it. And then again, that emptiness. To recognize this over and over and over is just as valid; it goes just as deeply over time in our being, so that we really know emptiness, as having a really profound blowout experience.

Those intense experiences can be so strong that they cut through really quickly, and we really get it for a while. But even those, after some time, again—you're home arguing with the husband, having to do the dishes, and there's a rising of clinging, death and birth of self, even after a really intense, opening, empty experience.

So on this level of moment-to-moment awareness of practice—and this isn't just about being on retreat, this is all the time in our life—it's extremely powerful and it's absolutely freeing. Because in any moment when that sense of self is solid, if you remember to turn around and look, it's like... ugh. And sometimes you can go see, "I don't want to see that this is just clinging. I want to be right." Clinging to being right.

We've used different approaches to help us have this sense of emptiness, to be, as Buddhadasa talks about, learning to be content with these moments of emptiness. Because they're often nothing that special. Can we be content with these moments? We actually then grow to appreciate and incline more towards the stillness of these moments. But first we need to keep recognizing and being content with that—with things just as they are.

We've used here the metaphor of space a lot as a way to help us recognize the heart-mind of non-clinging. It's a metaphor; it's not a completely accurate description, but it is helpful. Because, as Buddhadasa again says, we normally don't recognize the emptiness because we're so involved with the experience and concocting our thoughts about it and our stories about it. So when we remember the space, it doesn't mean we dissociate from experience or shut it out, but we see that there's this that we're fixated on, and there's all that space.

That's why, for me, being here in the desert is such a great place to explore arising of sense of self and resting in emptiness. Because I can be caught up in any particular thing—maybe I had a difficult interview, I'm working on my talk, I had an argument with somebody, or I'm just tired. I just walk out and look at the desert and the sky, and immediately there's just a space of awareness. And the difficult thing is also still arising. It's not like, "Oh, there's space. Nothing else is here. I don't know what's happening." Just spacious emptiness. That's kind of a false emptiness that we can fall into at times—it feels really nice, but we don't have a clue in life what's arising and passing within the space. It's like walking in the desert and tripping over the cholla because we're so lost. That's not really the emptiness I'm talking about. That leads to indifference, to disconnection.

True emptiness has that spaciousness. It's not necessarily the space of spreading out. It's the space of not being fixated on whatever object's arising. We know it's there, but we also recognize the space around it—the heart and mind of non-clinging. So it might be actual space, but it also allows for an immediacy of connection to any particular experience. Exquisitely present, and there's still that spaciousness, that stillness, because there's non-clinging in it.

Someone told me about an experience on this retreat. She was sitting and just noting what was arising, and there was a really loud sudden noise—which happens here a lot. Just a really loud sudden noise; the attention noticed it. Hearing. And it really startled her into a vivid wakefulness. Hearing. And then she said, as if the mind went to go back and realized, "Oh, there's nowhere to go back to. It's just this."

And that was not fearful. That was an experience for her of such joy and lightness and freedom. Just this. And I saw her not too long after that, and she had just been in that space. Just the ants. Just the wind. Just

the smell. Just the sensation. Just this.

That is like an exquisite presence in the heart and mind of non-clinging. It's spaciousness. It doesn't mean spaced out. It's spacious because there's not this fixated involvement. So when we use space as a metaphor, it's to help us recognize this quality of non-clinging. It's not to go off into outer space.

This true moment of emptiness, heart and mind of non-clinging—it doesn't really matter what experience happens to be coming and going. There's just this experience. It's exquisitely present, but it's empty of any I or mine, any separate self. And it doesn't lead us into a kind of passivity or disconnection from life or dissociation. Actually, it's the clinging, it's that I-ing and my-ing that creates the sense of separation, of fear, of me and other, of needing to protect, of needing to hold back.

When there's just that simplicity of presence without constructing an I around it, in any moment—that's what gives birth to true compassion. That's where real connectedness comes out of, because we see that's really what's true.

I just want to close with two quotations from two different Tibetans. From Padampa Sangye: "Once you realize emptiness"—and remember, realize it just for a moment, doesn't have to be the final one—"once you realize emptiness, it would be absurd to do anything harmful. When you realize emptiness, compassion arises with it simultaneously."

It's the same thing. Emptiness of I-ing and my-ing means everything is present here in this moment. The natural expression of awareness is the flame-like heat of compassion. The flame-like heat of compassion. It doesn't mean this is kind of cooled out, floating on a cloud. There can be active, total engagement and presence because there's nothing that needs to be held back. No self that needs to be held separate.

"Let the entire game happen on its own, springing up and falling back like waves, without changing or manipulating anything, and everything vanishes and reappears magically without end."

Nothing changes and everything changes.

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