Birth and Death of the Self

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:03:48

In one of the suttas, someone asked the Buddha to summarize in one phrase what it is that liberated ones know, or how it is that liberated beings are. The Buddha answered that what they know is that nothing whatsoever should be clung to. He went on to say that those who have heard this phrase have heard every phrase of the teaching. To have put it into practice is to have done every practice. Nothing whatsoever should be clung to.

In a way, this is one way of describing what I feel is the core, the pith teaching of the Buddha—the main, or actually only, thing we really need to know in our practice. And that's the understanding of no-self or of emptiness. I want to talk about this root teaching of no-self or emptiness, hopefully not in a theoretical way at all. I want to talk about it because it's very wonderful. It's the teaching closest to my heart.

I know that often when we mention no-self, there can be a sense of, "Oh no"—the heart kind of drops. "I never get this. It's too complicated for me. I'm not there yet. It makes me crazy to try and think about this." The mind starts spinning with all these what-ifs: "If there's no self, then..." fill in the blanks. My intention is not to engender a sense of confusion but to help point to the fact that this is actually not a complicated teaching at all. It's the most simple, the most simple expression of how things are. I actually think that we miss it because it's so simple and we get so involved in thinking about it.

What I hope to do is talk about inviting us to inquire in our practice, both into the sense of self when it arises, and also to recognize and explore the sense or feeling of emptiness, or simply non-self.

I'm going to be referring a lot to Ajahn Buddhadasa, who was a wonderful Thai monk and meditation teacher. He died in 1993. He was sort of a radical in the Theravada tradition—which in the sum of all of Buddhism isn't too radical—but he synthesized different traditions and produced some wonderful writings on the understanding of emptiness or sunyata, which is mentioned in the Pali texts, believe it or not. He talks very simply about the sense of emptiness as being the experience of a moment when it's empty of self, empty of the sense of "I" or "mine."

I want to invite us both to explore the presence of the sense of self and the absence of it. We can sometimes worry that it's too complicated for us to understand. In fact, I just read something about Buddhadasa's early teaching. He was quite old when he died, so he started teaching as a young monk in the 1930s in Thailand. At that time, apparently, it was felt that the teachings on emptiness or no-self were too complicated for lay people, and so they weren't taught to them. Buddhadasa, feeling quite rightly that this was the core liberation teaching, began teaching it to lay people because freedom is what this practice is about. Any of us with wise attention can understand and experience this. He began teaching it to lay

people, and now it's much more commonly taught.

The Buddha also taught sunyata, emptiness, non-self, to lay people. In fact, I read another sutta where one of his significant lay followers came to him and said, "Give us one teaching that will be to our benefit for a very long time." The Buddha gave him the teaching on emptiness. He said, "Really contemplate emptiness." And just like many of us, this layman—his name was Damodina—said, "Oh no, that's too hard for us. We're too involved with our homes and our children. We're too busy enjoying sandalwood paste and wearing perfumes. We can't be expected to understand and practice this. Give us something easier."

I guess we don't change much. But the fact remains that when the Buddha was asked for a teaching that would be of benefit for a long time, this is the one he offered. As he said in many suttas, "If it were not possible, I would not ask you to do so." He never put out something that was beyond our abilities or understanding.

This emptiness, this freedom from the sense of self—it's not, in fact, an esoteric or abstruse or rare experience at all. It's so normal, so natural. It's simply a mind that's undistracted. As Joseph spoke of last night, the nature of mind when not distracted is simply pure awareness. Buddhadasa calls it sati-pañña, mindfulness-wisdom. There's nothing more normal and more natural.

Many times throughout a day, this is our conscious experience, if we would only notice it with awareness—simply moments when there is this natural ease of being, natural awareness with no giving rise to a sense of I or mine. The thing is, so often we don't notice this, because it's not always spectacular. We tend to get much more involved in what we call distractions.

We might think the distraction is that loud sound, or this unpleasant emotion, or these obsessive thoughts that keep coming, or this pain in my knee, or just the creak of the floor. We get involved in the distractions, the emotions, whatever arises. But what we need to recognize is that it's not the appearance or what's arising that is the distraction. The root of all distraction, the root of all the resultant suffering, the root of our fear of pain and our yearning for pleasure is simply this false clinging that we call the sense of self—this false view of a someone here who is experiencing and keeping notes on it all.

Buddhadasa described it beautifully. He translates two Pali words in a way I particularly like. The momentary experience that we call me or mine—not even a view of self, but the momentary experience—he calls it "I-ing" and "my-ing." In a moment where there's born the sense of I, that is I-ing. When there's born the sense of mine, it's my-ing. I love that; it's really nice.

Because these are born many times in a day, and we leave them unexamined, we take it for granted. It feels like, it seems like, this sense of I or mine is an ongoing, ever-present aspect of our experience. Even at moments when it's not present, it's easy to overlook and then just say in memory, "Well, I wasn't noticing it then, but of course it was there. I just wasn't thinking about it." That's right—you weren't thinking about it, but it wasn't there.

Without investigating, it seems real. One of the traps we fall into in exploring the teachings of no-self is that rather than turning the discriminating awareness of investigation onto the experience of me itself, we tend to start thinking about it—thinking about how can there not be a self, I'm sure there is a self. The more we think about it, the more solid the sense of self seems, which only goes to support our idea in the first place.

What I personally find very interesting in my practice, what cuts through over and over again this unconscious belief in the ongoing nature of self, is when you recognize the presence of the feeling of I or mine and very simply turn the attention onto it. Bring the quality of investigation—not investigation of thinking, but of satipañña, of mindfulness wisdom. Turn it onto that experience that we're calling I or mine. What do we find?

This is from Nisargadatta Maharaj: "Is the mind real? It is but a collection of states, each of them transitory. How can a succession of transitory states be considered real? Even the basic idea 'I am the body' is a mental state and does not last. It comes and goes like all other mental states. The illusion of being the body-mind is there only because it is not investigated." Only because it's not investigated.

So when we do begin to investigate quite consciously, what do we find? Well, I'm going to tell you, but don't take my word for it, please. Continue to investigate each time you notice the feeling of I or mine arising. What we find is that the sense of self is merely a condition that arises when there's grasping and clinging in the mind. It's that simple—merely a condition that arises and passes, admittedly rather frequently, but that's all it is. And we can experience this with awareness over and over and over.

You can see this well with any sense-door contact. This is the dependent origination that we've talked about. There's the contact of a sense door, a thought, pleasant or unpleasant, the craving that arises. When that craving strengthens to grasping, there's the sense of I or mine, and it strengthens into becoming something. So the thought arises, "Hmm, concentration could be a little better." It could just be a thought that comes and goes. If there's a little clinging, it strengthens into grasping, and immediately is born "my concentration could be better." Strengthening even further into becoming: "I'm not doing so well in my practice."

Now, we often notice the suffering effects of clinging. Had the thought just come and gone, no problem. But what we can also do is consciously begin to notice, to explore with attention, that feeling of self that arises together with grasping. It's not just the grasping, but suddenly I have become quite strong and separate. You, or a meditation, or something else has also become quite strong and separate. We can feel experientially, in some way, that we can direct the attention to what we're calling I. We don't have to leave it nebulous—"Well, there's I, but I don't really look at it." That's what makes it seem like a solid thing.

When you really look, what do you find? Well, there's a feeling of grasping. Maybe there's a kind of almost physical sensation internally of contraction or restriction or clutching. You might notice just a narrowed-down, restricted consciousness.

So notice it the next time that a sense object comes up and there's some clinging arising in the mind. It can be so simple as, "Hmm, I wonder what's for lunch tomorrow?" And the mind just moves right into that, and you notice the clinging, you notice the wanting and the sense of distance—but also notice how "I" have become very solid. And then see: what are you calling "I" in that moment?

Buddhadasa calls this birth—this emergence of "I." I as the hungry person. I as the bad meditator. I as the lonely person. I as whatever. And so there's birth and death. We're being born and dying hundreds and hundreds of times in any one day.

We can notice this sense of birth, and we can notice when this particular becoming dissipates, when it fades away, when I'm no longer the hungry person. That's gone. There's no more clinging in the mind.

And this, I think, is a very important point: to maintain the alertness of awareness, because at the point of the dissipation of that particular birth, whatever it might be, often that's a moment when there's just the emptiness. Joseph spoke last night of shifting our reference point of our practice to really cultivating the mind of non-attachment. When a particular self dies, often in that moment there's just that purity of awareness that is the nature of what we are—the mind of non-attachment.

Do we even notice that? Or do we tend to dull out, wait for the next birth, wait for something to happen again—even if it's unpleasant—wait for a new birth and just miss the spaciousness, the real true happiness and peace of a mind of non-attachment?

Well, we usually don't have to wait too long. And it's really interesting to watch how, out of just clear alertness and peace and awareness, the birth of self can be so sudden and so strong. It's really quite funny if we could look at it that way.

Just a story once that illustrated this for me very strongly. I was on a self-retreat in California in a very beautiful environment, and I was sitting outside on a bench up high, looking down over a very spacious natural view. With my eyes open, I was sitting and feeling just very spacious, peaceful, aware—not much thought, not much construction, no sense of me or mine. Just being.

And then, you know, noticing different animals. There was a little skunk, and it was in a place where they have herds of white deer, so you could see them way down below. It was quite lovely, just watching coming and going. And some turkey vultures were swooping down and circling—just that sense of being one with nature, which is actually something Buddhadasa really encouraged as a practice: to spend time in nature. His whole monastery, Suan Mok, in southern Thailand, is a huge forest monastery of some three hundred acres. I spent some time there when I was a nun. And his philosophy really was to just let people go live in nature, and the mind and the heart quiets until one realizes one is one with nature. The sense of clinging to self tends to dissipate.

Well, anyway, so that was my experience at that moment. But the birds started coming down from some trees near me. I thought, "Far out, they're really close. I've never seen them so close." And then they were

circling. And then suddenly this thought arose in my mind: "Oh my God, I'm what they're circling."

And so fast—I mean, panic. Total panic arose in an instant. Definitely a real grasping of that thought, and that panic itself. I came very close to leaping up and screaming, "I'm still alive! I'm still alive!"

It was hugely amusing, even at the time. But it doesn't take much to come out of that peace, that spaciousness, into the grasping of self.

So let's just, for a moment, mention the various aspects of experience that clinging or grasping arises in relationship to—the various aspects of experience you could say we identify with. None of this is news to anybody. But this is not meant to make a list in your head. Rather, it's to encourage turning wise attention onto both the object or experience that is grasped and also that sense of me or mine in the feeling of the grasping itself.

Of course, one of the big areas of experience is that of our body, our physical sensations. When we're in the realm of thinking about it, the realm of view or opinion, the sense that I am my body—you might in one way be able to say, "Well, obviously I'm not, because the way I look now is very different from how I was when I was ten days old." You couldn't even say it was the same. We've got endless rationalizations about how I'm not the body. We can have various organs missing and that's gone, and we think, "Well, that doesn't seem to affect me. I guess I wasn't that."

But that's all rationalization, I would like to say, in my particular experience. Without really examining when it's present—the sense "I am the body"—that's where we can see what we're really doing, calling in our experience "I" or "mine." And when we look, the sense "I am the body" breaks down every time. All we need to do is look, not take it for granted, not think our ideas about it are enough. Because in most cases, our ideas about it are not enough.

We don't sit here and think, "I am my body." It's not quite that clear. But when there's a physical experience and that sense of I, look—bring wise attention to the experience itself and see. The idea of our body may be "my knee hurts." But when we really bring attention in a sitting, there's no knee, there's no "my," there's just bubbling or vibrations or tingling. And even those words are concepts.

Then I'll notice a mental image of knee, or a thought: "That's my knee. What's going to happen to it if I don't move?" And often, if I'm not paying attention, that image is actually where the grasping of self comes. The grasping at I becomes this image of a knee, or this person who has a knee. If I don't notice that it's not actually the sensation that's being grasped at all—it's the mental image.

I notice this really often when I'm sitting. There's just sensation, sensation, and then a flash of an image. Maybe it's of my whole body sitting, maybe it's of my face, maybe it's of the body part—doesn't really matter what. If I can just notice the image—seeing, seeing, it's just an image. But often if I don't notice it, there's a real grasping at it, and I think I'm identified with the sensation. I keep looking at the sensation and just see bubbling. Clearly, I don't feel grasping around that. But there's still a sense of self.

So that's why it's so important: when I notice the sense of self, don't just say, "Well, I'm not clinging to this bubbling." Turn around and bring wise attention to the sense of I itself. Often I'll see, ah, I'm identifying with this image or this thought of body. It's often much more subtle than we might think.

"I'm so hungry," I think. But when we really bring attention to hunger, sometimes it's hard to even find it physically. It's a funny thing. All you can find is little movements or little bubblings or something. You think, "Why is this bothering me? There's nothing even here." But again, turn—don't just say, "I guess I'm not attached, there's nothing going on." Clearly something's going on. Turn again to the sense of self and see where it's landing. Where's the grasping? Again, it might be an image or a memory or a thought of the future.

I started this by saying a sense of identification with the body, and often it is around a particular sensation, but often it's around a thought or an image. When we really bring attention to the body in meditation, all there is is sensations coming and going, coming and going. There isn't anything solid. And when we say, "Oh yes, don't tell me there's nothing solid—in my experience there's something solid," that's an idea.

That solidity is an idea. If we really experience it, there's just a moment of sensation, another moment of sensation, and the thoughts make it seem solid.

So just noticing as it comes and goes, comes and goes, and noticing the thought. Not trying to change anything. Just noticing where this grasping is arising. What's it grasping at? Where's this birth of self arising in that moment?

And again, if anything I'm saying gets you really confused, just don't even think about it. Seriously, thinking about it is only going to lead to more confusion. Just bring your attention back to that experience of who's confused? What's that feeling of confusion? Turn around and feel the sense of I in that.

So there's body. And of course there's vedanā, the feeling tone—the pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. We've talked about it a lot, so people here are getting quite subtle in noticing pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. And even if you think you're not subtle in it, even noticing it is subtle. I mean, how many people on the street could you stop and say, "Now, is your experience as you put your foot down pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral?" They would look at you like you're nuts. But we're actually noticing it quite a lot.

And it's interesting to notice because this is another aspect of experience that can easily be clung to and thought of with that feeling, to give birth to that sense of I or mine. And it can be easy to miss that it's the feeling tone, especially when it's pleasant.

For example, if you have a sitting where the breath is smooth and calm and the mind stays there fairly easily—and of course we like it—you really are noticing the smoothness and the calmness. And in your mind you're saying, "I know this will change. I know I like it, but it's okay. I know it will change." And it does change. And we're distraught when it changes, even though we thought we had it all set up. We could

see, "I know I'm not this breath," and that was really clear. But sometimes we miss the fact that the grasping was around the pleasant feeling. And so the sense of self, the birth of I, was happening in each moment of grasping at that pleasant feeling without quite noticing it.

This might seem a little subtle, but it's really important because that's the place where the birth of self happens quite a lot. Buddhadasa gave as one of his ways of helping us see through the illusion of self to keep investigating at this point of vedanā, especially at pleasant feeling. Apparently he was really big on exploring the illusory nature of pleasant feeling.

By illusory nature, we mean it comes and goes—that's what we mean. He talks about it like wave-like nature. There's a nice physical sensation, it's pleasant. The pleasant feeling kind of comes up like a wave and it's really nice, and then it crashes like a wave and it's gone. Just keep noticing this over and over and over.

And he says—he sounds sort of uncompromising, but I think it's often true—that in contemplating how pleasant nature arises and disintegrates, arises and disintegrates, just noticing the impermanence of all these aspects of experience, as Joseph said last night, but especially with pleasant feeling, it can begin to undercut what we've talked about so much but we still get caught in: that underlying belief that really the way to value life is by how much pleasant feeling it affords us.

As Buddhadasa says, how many of your decisions, how many of the things you do, the jobs you have, the place you live, the people you hang out with, the people you get involved with, just the choices we make—how much of those choices really, when we're not paying attention, are driven by what we think will afford us the most pleasant feeling? It's really quite interesting, I thought, when I looked at it. And of course the mind says, "Oh, that's enough. I don't want to look at that. Don't look at that one anymore. Thank you very much."

So of course we're having to look at that here. That's the whole setup. That's why, I'd just like to point out, that's why it gets so difficult sometimes. And sometimes there seem to be waves, waves in yogi land, of difficulty.

I almost think it's contagious, you know—difficulty in the form of suffering. And how much of the suffering, all the suffering, is because there's the birth of "I" in that moment. How much of it is around the simple fact that we are being united with unpleasant feelings and we can't change that. Just that simple. The arising of the birth of "I" and "mine" around wanting pleasant feeling—it's really amazing when we truly look at it. So that's a quite important one, where the self is born.

And of course, there are thoughts and emotions. This is something we've talked about quite a lot. Thoughts are in some ways more difficult because the birth of the sense of self can come so quickly with them, and thoughts and emotions are so complex and feed into each other that it can be quite difficult to catch the moment of birth of self. But we can at least notice after it's born. We can feel its presence. And rather than

hating it or thinking something's wrong, just turn attention to the birth, to the sense of self.

Just an example—I remember when I was sitting a couple of years ago, how such simple, mundane little thoughts can give rise to such solid clinging of "me." I was doing my walking meditation and again, just present, nothing going on, just kind of awareness. And I sort of felt an itching and ran my finger under my turtleneck, and was aware of it, was noticing it. And in that running of the finger, there was a sort of memory, a body-visual memory of many other times of doing that same thing. It just felt so familiar. And then there were a lot of mental images that flashed through—just of my body walking, of what I was wearing. And then I thought, "Gosh, I wonder how I look. I bet I look like a real schlump, the way I schlump around here when I'm doing walking meditation."

And that was all it took. That was a flash. I mean, that was less time than it took me to say one of those pieces. There was this strong birth of self and other, uncomfortable and self-conscious, and aversion. The whole story. It doesn't take much.

I'm not saying this to be discouraging. No, I'm trying to be encouraging, because then we can realize how subtle and quick it is. Rather than thinking, "Oh, I'm never going to see through this, it's too much," it's like, no, no—there are so many opportunities. It's true. I didn't even mean that to be funny. There are just so many opportunities. And it's only moment to moment.

Sometimes I used to find myself sort of sitting back and waiting for the big flash of no-self that was just going to end all the sense of self. Of course, I was positing that there is a self—the flash of no-self would somehow uproot it and throw it away, and then I wouldn't have to deal with all the suffering anymore. I'm still waiting for that particular experience to happen. But along the way, in twenty-whatever years I've been practicing, there have been an infinity of moments of seeing through this birth of the sense of self.

It's not something to be gotten rid of. It's simply to see for what it is. And any moment that we are aware of the sense of "I" or "mine" being there is a moment when we can meet it with wise attention and see, "Oh, it's just a momentary experience." It might be a sensation, it might be that sense of clutching, it might be clutching at an image. It's something slightly different each time I turn my attention to it. And whatever it is, it's no big deal.

Because all there is to experience is the six sense doors: touching, tasting, smelling, hearing, seeing—I'm trying to think of them all—that's five, and the mind. The big one, of course. But that's all. Even what we're calling "sense of self" is nothing other than one of these sixth sense experiences, and it might be a slightly different one each time you investigate it. So really noticing that helps to break down any underlying sense of unchanging nature that it might have when not investigated. When investigated, there's nothing really there. When uninvestigated, "I" am so solid—there's no way I could not be here.

With thoughts, similarly with emotions. We've talked a lot about the impermanence of emotions, watching them come and go. Even when you feel, "I've been so sad all day," really noticing the gaps in that. All of

that, of course, helps to break the sense that I am my sadness, I am my grief, I am my excitement.

But just another piece I'd like to put in is that we can tend at times—or I can tend anyway—to think that it's the presence of the emotion itself that's the problem. Of course, I only think this when I'm really somehow grasping at that emotion or grasping at wanting it to go away. But to think it's the emotion itself that's the problem... We can, again, begin to notice when sadness comes, for example.

It could be anything. There's times when it's simply sadness, full presence, awareness, feeling it fully. I don't mean noting while the sadness is over there in the corner somewhere. I mean really in the middle of it, except there's nobody there in the middle of it. It's just sadness, fully felt. And many people say, no, there's no problem with that. You couldn't even say unpleasant—it's just what it is, sadness. And then at some point, that sense of clinging arises and becomes I who am sad, or becomes my sadness. And at that point, it becomes problematic. At that point, there's some extra twist, and the suffering begins.

So in exploring or investigating what I'm calling sense of self, we can notice when we're suffering in an emotion—notice not only the emotion itself, trying to accept it. We do all our little tricks: first to get rid of it, and then to try and accept it, and try to remember, you know, all the stuff we do. But also turn attention to the feeling of I in that sadness. It's part of it. And it feels different when I am sad than when sadness is arising—just sadness. It feels different. Simply begin to notice that difference. Give it attention. We can see the birth of me, the birth of mine in the sadness or the happiness or the stillness or the peace.

Just two other areas I want to mention quickly that we very often identify with. By identify, again, I mean this clinging of self around experience. Because they're so subtle: that of intention, obviously, and that of consciousness, the knowing itself.

And again, not to think about these, but one of the reasons that we bring into the instructions noticing before big movements that intention—because when we notice the intention, we see how fleeting, how fast it is, and how subtle an experience. But we also clearly see, as it comes and goes, that it's so clear it's not me. There's no grasping at it.

That's why it's fun for me—I like it when I start having an itch in a sitting, because I can just watch the intention to lift my arm come and go, and come and go, you know, ten or twenty times. And I really like that because each time the intention comes and goes, it's just so clear that it's another arising appearance that's conditioned by not liking the itch, and that's all.

When we don't notice intention, that's when we really easily think: Who moved? I moved. Who noted? I noted. Who's eating? Who's standing up? Who came here? I. But it's just grasping around intention.

Also with citta, consciousness, the experience—you could say—of knowing itself. Last night Joseph was talking about the natural nature of mind, just simply of awareness, and how spontaneously appearances arise and are known, quite effortlessly. And my mind, of course, in its more grasping mode goes: Yes, sure, spontaneously known by whom? By me. Clearly I am knowing and recognizing these appearances when

they arise.

And a lot of that is because the sense of knowing, the experience of knowing, is quite subtle and hard to notice the coming and going of it. So it's very easy to identify, to grasp at it as me, because we don't even recognize its presence in the first place, never mind that it's coming and going. It's hard to even recognize its presence in a moment. And so we easily get into a sense of grasping, a birth of self around the knowing itself.

What I find with both of these two—intention and knowing—what even complicates and strengthens the sense of self further, is that because these are very subtle and hard to notice, and to notice the grasping, we then tend to think about it. So for example, with that example of grasping at the knowing itself: Who's knowing? I'm knowing. And then hearing what I just said, my mind would start to go: What do you mean, the experience of knowing? It comes and goes? What do you mean it comes and goes? I don't notice it coming and going. How can it come and go? How can it even exist? And then the more I think about it: How can you say that's not me? It feels like it's always ongoing.

The mind just takes off. And the end result of that is the birth of self happening in that moment—around the thinker, around the analyzer. So by the time we've thought that through, I feel much more solid than I did before I started that line of thought. And this tends to reinforce the belief that this line of thought is true, because the more I think about it, the more solid I feel.

I don't know if this makes sense, but I've been noticing this in myself. If I think about intention, if I think about consciousness or awareness, I feel really solid—because there's a clinging to the thoughts themselves. That's why it's so important in this whole area to simply use wise attention, wise discernment, and come right back to the feeling of "I" itself. It's not like you have to untangle everything.

I have spent a lot of time working my mind into this feeling of crack, trying to understand what "no self" could be, or how could I not exist, or how can awareness not be me when it so obviously feels like me—that kind of thing. I would just bring my mind to the point of implosion, and I would feel really solid. I wish I could spare you all that, because it never led anywhere.

But at that moment, you don't have to backtrack. When what I feel like is going to implode, simply turn the attention onto "I." What am I calling "I"? And all I feel in that moment is, oh—tension. That's it. Or contraction. Or mental image. Or a thought. I'm not trying to simplify. It really is simple. It just takes the cutting through of mindfulness wisdom, the cutting through of wise attention and wise discernment. Simply come back to see what's happening right now.

So we don't have to get rid of some idea of self. But by coming back with wise attention each time that we're aware of a sense of self, we see its illusory nature over and over and over, or its transient, its changing nature over and over and over. And it becomes easier not to get so caught in it, in these ideas, or even in the sense of self. We don't have to fight it. It's just another arising appearance.

So often when I'm on retreat—not in my daily life, but when I'm on retreat—I think I mentioned this one morning, one of the notes I'll be making: seeing, seeing, hearing, thinking, ah—self. What I'm doing is landing with my attention at that moment on what feels like me. And sometimes it's an image and sometimes it's a sensation. It's never anything very out of the ordinary. And it's always a different experience. It really breaks up the attachment to this idea. And it becomes much easier to incline towards stillness, to incline towards the mind of non-attachment, mind of pure awareness.

This has the feeling of this stillness to me. It's called "The Desert Has Many Teachings," from a woman from thirteenth-century Germany:

In the desert, turn towards emptiness, fleeing the self.
Stand alone, ask no one's help, and your being will quiet,
Free from the bondage of things.

I don't think this woman was ever in the desert. She lived in Germany in the thirteenth century. I really like that. Turn towards emptiness. Stand alone. Ask no one's help. And your being will quiet, free from the bondage of things.

It happens quite naturally. The sense of self becomes merely another appearance, coming and going, that we don't need to fear, we don't need to hate, we don't need to get caught in. It arises due to conditions and passes when those conditions change. And as Joseph said last night, over and over: all conditions change. There are no conditions which do not change.

Buddhadasa—again, I thought this was funny. He gets so emphatic.

He went back to that phrase: nothing whatsoever should be clung to. And then he added: as I or mine. The core of the Buddha's teaching.

And then he expands on it like this. He says, "No one"—and he writes underneath it, "that means no exceptions"—"should grasp or cling, give rise to ego consciousness, to anything"—"that means no exceptions"—"as being I or mine." No exceptions. No one should cling to anything. That means anything. No exceptions.

Not because to cling to anything is bad, but because it's the root of all our suffering and confusion. And because in the not clinging to anything is this vastness, this peace of just being, of awareness—the peace of non-grasping.

It doesn't have all the intensity of our high pleasant experiences. The mind and heart need to be somewhat refined to even think that "the peace of non-grasping" sounds like a good thing. That's why we sit for three months. I actually think that now, watching the incessant arising of the grasping of self—its death and its birth and its death—the peace of non-grasping sounds pretty good. And it's wonderful. And it's not something foreign to any of us.

So that's the other side of bringing investigation—investigating what we're calling self in any moment—but also noticing the peace of non-grasping when we can recognize it.

Buddhadasa writes: "If at any moment any person has a mind empty of clinging to I and mine, even if only for one instant, that means the mind has realized emptiness." Even for one instant. True, it's not the emptiness of total liberation, nibbāna, where the sense of grasping will never arise again. But still, in that moment where there's no clinging or grasping of I and mine, the mind is pure, radiant, and at peace. And we, each of us, experience this over and over.

So the other aspect of our practice that I feel is so important is not to overlook these times—to learn to recognize them. Clearly, you can't recognize it with grasping, right? Because as soon as we're grasping, the mind of non-grasping is not accessible. So simply notice with awareness, recognize the mind of non-grasping.

We tend often to skip over it. It's as if—I notice in myself—the mind is more comfortable relating to things, relating to objects, relating to experience: liking it, disliking it, analyzing it. It's more oriented toward doing. Of course, "I" am more there then. But we can consciously begin to recognize these moments of emptiness—many times a day, nothing so exciting, no big bang—but just recognize and consciously meet with awareness these moments of non-grasping of self. So that we gradually learn to be comfortable, to trust this pure awareness, to actually be content with the peace of non-grasping.

I read somewhere a reference to "the sky yoga of non-grasping." I really like that image—the sky yoga of non-grasping. And I've found helpful, as a metaphor, a way to practice at times that helps me tune into this mind of non-attachment: the metaphor of space. I suppose that's why I liked the idea of the sky yoga of non-grasping.

Joseph talked about shifting our reference point to the mind of non-attachment, rather than being so focused on objects, on appearances. And I found that tuning into space or silence was a way that helped me loosen up the fixation on changing appearances.

So notice when a thought arises: the space around it, the space before it. When the thought ends, rather than immediately clutching back to the breath so that there's no space without things arising, just notice the space. Notice the emptiness, the silence, and let the breath arise by itself, or whatever else comes next. The space as an emotion dissipates—just notice the silence, the space. In between breaths, in between actions. We're always filling up our time. Sometimes I would consciously make space—between when I end a sitting and when I get up to walk—just a space. And just notice the space, the silence.

Not spacing out—I'm not talking about that. The space of awareness where there's a vibrancy, a wakefulness in the silence. And don't make much of it. This is just a metaphor to help tune into the mind of non-attachment.

And it's interesting. That's precisely why we've been using hearing as one of our anchors—because it can

help tune us into this sense of spaciousness. We tend not to get so involved with sounds. We don't make another one happen. And we can notice the space in between, the silence.

When we can bring this sense of space to an experience, you see the difference. When we're really fixated on, say, a difficult emotion—when we're fixated on that—it's so much more difficult. There's so much more suffering than when we can just open up and have space around it. When the mind is restricted, that one thing takes up the whole field.

I remember one time, the house I'm living in, there didn't used to be a little house next to it, which there is now. And in that period—between when there wasn't another house and there began to be another house—my sense of space got completely encroached upon. I would sit at my kitchen window and look out at the woods, and that's where the house was being built, right in that view. It got to where there were only four little stakes in the woods marking where the house was going to be. And I would sit at my window and all I could see was those four stakes, nothing else. There was aversion and anger and all different feelings. I got really miserable sitting at my kitchen table, until finally I saw what was happening.

Which is interesting. As soon as I saw it, I said, "This has to stop. I can't live the rest of my life here doing this." And I just opened up the space. And it's interesting—it just stopped being a problem. The fixation makes it so much more real. The sense of space around something makes it much more workable.

We can all practice this here with things that arise. You can see some little thing drives you nuts, and when you can just expand around it, it still might be unpleasant, but there's not that fixation of self on it.

It isn't always easy to maintain this sense of spaciousness. The energy needs to be balanced—the concentration and mindfulness. When they drop, being spacious turns to spacing out. That's when we need the precision of technique—to come back and feel the breath, feel sensations, use the noting, use connecting with objects and appearances, notice beginnings and endings. It wakes us up, brings vibrancy again.

But another thing I've noticed in myself is that tuning into space sometimes gets uncomfortable. My mind gets a little restless. It wants something to focus on. I was again sitting in California, a different place, and when I noticed this I was sitting with my eyes open, a very broad vista—meadows, rolling hills—just sitting, spacious. I was consciously tuning into space, and there were four little horses. They were so tiny. They were so far away, such an insignificant part of the vista.

And I would notice, as I would open to spaciousness, I could just be vibrant in that for not very long, and then almost as if by reflex, the mind would get uncomfortable or restless, and it would zoom in on these tiny little horses and sort of fixate on them, as if looking for some kind of stability or security. I could sort of see the rest of the spaciousness, but not very well. And this happened over and over and over.

I found it really fascinating because I could correlate it to my experience in meditation—how just resting and trusting that spacious quality of awareness, the mind has a kind of knee-jerk reflex to want to fixate

on things. It's hard to trust, to relax, to not need something happening, to not need to have the birth of an "I."

As Thich Nhat Hanh says, we're afraid of nothingness. And because we're afraid of it, the mind clings to a belief in a permanent self. And that's what's so strange. We're afraid of nothingness. But seeing through the sense of self isn't nothingness. It's not annihilation. It is the entryway to a peace and a happiness that all this grasping of self can never, ever give us. All that grasping gives us is confusion and suffering.

And this seeing through is not passive. It's not unfeeling. It's not uncaring or life-negating. It's the doorway to freedom and true compassion. As one Tibetan teacher said, once you realize emptiness, it would be absurd to do anything harmful. When you realize emptiness, compassion arises with it simultaneously.

So in some ways I think this is our root practice. Just play with it. Explore the sense of self. Let the awareness, the mind, incline to space. Notice emptiness. Notice when it is empty of I-ing and my-ing. And just notice that. That's all.

There's nothing to lose except our suffering.

So let's sit for a few minutes.

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