Perception and Papañca

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 55:42

Tonight I want to talk about perception, papañca, and right view. And after the questions and answers this morning, I'm afraid it's just going to get all of you thinking more, but that's out of my control.

When we talk about insight, we have to ask: what is the nature of insight? What is an insight? What I was pointing to, what we point to, is that you can't get to an insight by thinking. It's not something that is a product of thought. Insight is really a function of an intuitive process—a new way of seeing a situation or an experience. Insight isn't about creating some mental state or changing what's actually going on. We suddenly, "aha," see something differently. The situation doesn't change, but our perspective on it can change because we've perceived it in a different way. And of course that can be insights into our psychological makeup, into how to deal with something in daily life, and so-called Dharma insights—all of it.

So what allows for this radical shift of perspective? Just to give a very mundane example, which I think would be familiar to most of you—it's simple, but I think it's very apt. You know those pictures, I don't know what they call them, magic eye or something, that if you look at them, they're colored sort of geometric blocks. There's no particular content in them, but if you hold it in a certain way and let your eyes relax, suddenly out pops a spaceship or dinosaurs or hockey players or whatever happens to be within that image.

So what allows for that? There's nothing different in that graphic design when you see the hockey players—there's nothing that wasn't there before. And then when your eyes go back and you only see the graphic design, it's also nothing that wasn't there before, right? It's just that somehow you suddenly could let go of the normal kind of rigid way of looking at it and see in a different way. It's a kind of combination of a relaxed letting go—not holding onto the blue and yellow geometric designs—and a steadiness of that relaxed attention. And also a sense of allowing, isn't there? Like if you hold it up and say, "Where's the dinosaurs?" you know, it doesn't work. My mother, bless her, has never been able to see anything in one of these and it drives her crazy. Once we were in a mall and they had giant ones, and everyone's looking going, "Wow, look at this, look at that." She got so frustrated.

So that's how we feel when we're looking for an insight, isn't it? "I want an insight into impermanence," you know, and you're just ready to kick yourself after a while because you're looking for it.

On the other hand, once you've recognized the spaceship or the dinosaur, even when you're not seeing it again, you know it's somehow in there. And if someone else were to come up and say, "No, there's nothing in there—you made that up," you don't get upset about it. You don't have to prove anything. You know that

that's there.

So it's like that, I think, with an insight. It doesn't stay. That particular perception isn't always that way. But having perceived in that way, it makes a shift in the way that we relate. And that moment of seeing differently exerts an influence, you could say, in the mind stream or in the way that we respond in a similar situation. It loosens something up, doesn't it? And even though we're not always perceiving in that way, we know things are more than they seem. We know that stupid little geometric design has something more in it. And so that's sort of the nature of insight.

It's not a thought, although God knows we will think about it as soon as we have an insight, and that's what we do. That's our way of trying to understand it and, of course, hold on to it. But the insight itself isn't a thought. It's just having allowed it to arise, be experienced, and let go, and it exerts an influence in the way that we perceive and understand. Something has changed.

In all of our practice, in all the Dharma teachings—Joseph was talking about the mind of non-clinging last night. There were a lot of questions about, well, if it's not a state, what is it? And it's really this sense that we're not trying to create or get to someplace new other than this, but simply to see through our mind's incomplete or inaccurate or limited or confused or plain wrong way of looking at and perceiving experience. I mean, it's all of those at different times.

I actually think the translation of diṭṭhi as "wrong view" is quite literal, not judgmental. It's not "this is wrong view and you're stupid to hold that view and this is right view." It's like we really experience or see or describe things in the wrong way—wrong meaning inaccurate. And so our practice isn't so much about changing anything out there as just that letting go that allows a different perception to be received. And if we think we know what that's going to be, we're already not allowing it to be received.

So that takes us to the experience of perception itself. I want to talk a little bit about that. Perception—saññā in Pali—is one of the five aggregates, five experiences that make up what we call a human being.

And I just say that to show that perception is arising in every mind moment.

So what is it? Just very basically, perception is described as that moment when there's sense contact—you hear a sound. Perception would be that immediate arising: hands clapping. It just comes with it so often. And a lot of people in interviews have said, "You know, I hear a sound and right away my mind goes 'bird call,'" as if they want that not to happen. It's just what happens most of the time. There's a sense contact, there's perception. We recognize it. So it's a faculty that's based on recognition, discernment, based on memory. If we hear a sound we've never heard before, there won't be an immediate perception. But—and this is where it gets interesting—most likely we'll make something up. This is the whole basis where perception gets very interesting to explore in our practice.

So, a moment of perception: sound, bird call, happening all the time. What's interesting to explore when

we have the luxury of this relatively simple, quiet time to watch our minds is how, through perception, through the recognition, we perceive, we describe, we explain our whole world. We sort of land ourselves in place and time starting with perception.

For example, the bell rings. Right away we know that's the bell. It's 7:30. I'm at IMS. It's time for the talk. I'm on a three-month retreat. I had a great day, a bad day, a boring day. I wonder who's talking. I like it. I don't like it. I'm tired. I'm not tired. Our whole story, our whole sense of landing in this world, in this context, can arise from that perception and the thoughts about it and the associations and the memories.

Which is fine, as long as we know what's happening, as long as we realize that's what's happening. Often the description, the context that we put together from that perception—7:30, bell ringing, talk—we're in agreement about that context, which is good. It's helpful that we're in agreement about that. But because so many of the perceptions we are in agreement about, that leads us not really to even question very much. Why would we question? It's obvious that's what's happening. The bell rings and this is what it means and this is what I do.

Now, the problem is—and don't believe me, look for yourself—even if it's not very often, even if it's only sometimes, the perception can be quite inaccurate. It might be incomplete, colored by ignorance, or it might be colored by the particular mental states that are present at the time of that sense contact, which, if we don't recognize that, can completely distort—or a little bit distort—the perception.

The basic distortion, of course, is ignorance. It's a state of mind. It's not an amorphous thing that's hovering over us that we have to somehow chip our way out of. It arises and passes, just like any other state of mind. But it's that kind of cloudy, dull, not-recognizing state of mind. I think of when I'm driving and it's foggy at night, like these early fall nights. I'll have these moments—I have them a lot, and it's not just based on the fog. I'll be driving along and suddenly I have no clue where I am. Not only what state, but what country. What time of year is it? What day is it? And I'll really, for a moment, be looking for some kind of sight, something I can recognize—oh, the pizza parlor. I'm in Barre. Barre. It must be fall. Fall, right. It's the three-month retreat. Luckily, those don't last too long—so far.

I know the day is coming when those moments last longer.

That's like your basic ignorance—not recognizing what's happening. Another way ignorance colors perception is if I go around without my glasses on. Literally, I can't tell what's happening. If I'm in my house without my glasses, and I'm a bit particular about the house being really tidy, I'll be there thinking, "Oh, it's so neat. There's no dust, there's no dirt." And I get very happy about it. Then I'm working at my desk with my glasses on, and I start walking around going, "Hey, look at this! Look at this dust! Look at this grime! I thought it was so clean!" I get very unhappy. So the sense of ignorance is like not quite perceiving things the way they are.

It can also be a mental state—say, of desire or aversion or fear. For example, a friend told me about being

at work when her mind was colored with a state of worthlessness, that self-judging feeling. You know that state. Not recognizing it, of course. And somebody across the big office frowned, happened to be looking in her direction and frowned. The perception, the immediate recognition, wasn't the way I just described it. It was, "He's frowning at me." Just seeing very clearly that's what it is—she thought very clearly.

Now the problem—and this isn't the only problem, that we perceive incorrectly—but this is the classic description: what one perceives, one thinks about. What one thinks about, one complicates. This is the classic description of papañca. One complicates with associations, with memories, with ideas, by coloring it with mental states. And these turn into—in the commentary they say—these complications turn into the notions that assail and overwhelm a person. But we don't think it's the notions assailing and overwhelming us, do we? We think this is an accurate description of reality, and reality is assailing and overwhelming us. And this is where we really get into suffering.

So, for example, my poor friend didn't just stop with, "Oh, he's frowning at me, but I see that my mind state is colored with worthlessness and I'm probably perceiving inaccurately, so I'll let it go." We wish! She spent the whole day—I mean, she told me about this later, so she learned from it—the whole day: "What did I do? Why is he angry at me? He's always like that with me. What did I do wrong? I'm a nice person." The whole day she was just obsessed by this.

And the next day, coming in, a little bit cleared out of that mental state, she realized he wasn't even looking at her. He was thinking about some family problem at home. It had nothing in the world to do with her. He probably didn't even register she was there. But she spent the day obsessing about that.

This is perception, proliferation, major papañca—a description of the world that in that moment we really believe, and then we suffer from. And it happens often. It's actually kind of scary when you start to see how often it can be really, amazingly out of touch with what's actually going on, which is much more simple than we like to think. We get so far away from the facts so quickly.

So with ignorance, with the delusion and confusion in the mind, often we'll perceive—say, with sight—a kind of partial thing. We don't know what it is. And without a pause of a beat, the mind makes something up. I was walking in the woods in Switzerland years ago with Fran, and I just saw out of the corner of my eye this big yellow and white thing. And I said, "Oh, what's a circus tent doing here?" She looked at me like I was nuts because, of course, there wasn't a circus tent there. And as soon as I looked, I could see it was a huge boulder with lichen on it. Now, that's relatively harmless. Yeah, Fran said I shouldn't tell that story because it makes me look stupid. But still.

I said, that's my point. That's what ignorance does. I'm not taking it personally. That's what ignorance does. We see something, we make it up. That's an easy one. There's nowhere to go with that. You see it, okay, finished. Oh, ha, ha, ha. But what about the ones we don't see? Wasn't that funny.

We get into clinging, actually, to the stories, to the papañca, to the perception itself. Clinging because we

don't even recognize that we're clinging. We just think this is how it is.

I love this when it happens on retreat because it busts it for me. You know, you're sitting in the dining room, you're dutifully not looking around, and someone comes and sits next to you. You don't look. But as you know, we know who everyone is here. We have our opinions about everyone based on very little, but they're strong and they're true, right? And so this person—you immediately know who it is based on some perception, some whiff, some color, some felt sense. And it happens to be a person that somehow either pushes your buttons or you compare yourself to or you feel self-conscious around. So through the whole meal, you're going through so much, all the emotions and the projection and the self-consciousness, and it's torment. And after twenty minutes, you happen to look up and the person you thought it was walks through, going to the dish room.

That happens to me all the time. Until I saw that person, I would have sworn to my grave that I knew who that was. Absolute certainty. Total delusion. And we build up a whole story and we suffer from it. So I like that when I see it—it really busts it. Sometimes we're so attached to our description or the perception itself that we don't actually let go of it.

So this is like a German joke that Franz told me, though it actually happens. Sometimes at night, getting on the Autobahn, someone might go on the wrong entrance and they're actually driving the wrong way on the highway. It just happens. And then on the traffic radio, they call this person a ghost driver. The traffic radio will say, "Between Augsburg on the way to Munich on the Autobahn, there's a ghost driver, so stay over to the side." And the joke is the person will tune on the radio—the person who is the ghost driver—and say, "A ghost driver? There's many ghost drivers."

So you get the drift. I think we all do that. When we're caught in clinging to some perception and the description ensuing from it, it's as if our awareness snaps shut. We don't let in any perception that challenges the way we've already decided things are. Like that ghost driver, we don't let it in. The trouble is, we usually don't know we're even doing that. We really just think that's how things are.

The Dalai Lama said once that all of our problems stem from mistaken perception. That's quite a statement. All of our problems stem from mistaken perception. That's why there's so much emphasis on direct experience, on true knowledge. In other words, our mindfulness practice, the bare attention—what's actually happening prior to all the stories we make up.

We can still notice perception, so it's not about saying there shouldn't be perception. But can we even hold that tinge of possibility that maybe the perception could possibly, just maybe, not be totally accurate? That it might be another way? Just hold the possibility. And that then the descriptions and the context that we're putting ourselves and the world in from that perception could be like that or could be different. Like the magic eye.

I would say in my experience that the most subtle and powerful description we make up of the

world—and we don't often recognize it as description—is that seeming experience we have of me, of I, being some kind of solid, continuous, ongoing being, making decisions, doing things, in control of what happens, whatever our story is. And we spend a lot of energy and practice wanting to get rid of this I, because we hear that that's the way to letting go, that's the way to freedom.

But really, another way to approach it is to recognize that this story we tell ourselves of I—the physical experience, whatever that continuous solid experience is—is simply based on an inaccurate perception, a misperception, wrong view, literally. But it's reinforced so frequently, and because it's so common with us, we mostly don't question it. We don't even recognize it's there as a description. We just go along thinking that's how it is, and it's so ingrained. We're so not used to looking into it that even when we try to look into it—like we were talking this morning, trying to understand—it's just another way of reifying the solidity of the sense of me. So we have to look in a different way.

And that's what mindfulness practice is all about—looking in a different way.

It's often difficult to have the true openness to meet experience moment to moment without already having the overlay of our description, our perception. When we don't really know, when we can't yet recognize that it is an overlay of description, we don't even think "that's how it is"—it's more like we know that's how it is. Like that guy driving against the traffic.

So the whole sense of our body as solid and continuous—even though we can intellectually, all of us, look in the mirror and say, "Well, I sure don't look like I looked when I was three years old. It's certainly changed enormously." Inside, I don't feel like I've changed. I still feel like me, the same me from when I was three years old. If you ask me what feels the same, there actually isn't anything that feels the same. It feels completely different, but I still would say that it feels like me. It's sort of unexamined.

The analogy I often use for sighted people is that of seeing. We've talked a lot here about bringing awareness to seeing, to the eye door, because for many people—not everyone, but for many of us—seeing congeals so quickly. The perceptions of sight solidify so quickly into the classic description of how things are. When I look out here, I could say "form and color," but what I see is a bunch of people, each of you distinct. I know the names of some of you, I can look at the expressions on your faces, I have associations, I'm sitting here, and it's all really solid. And for most of us, because we're in agreement, it really seems like we see things as they are.

But of course we know that different animals have vastly different fields of vision. How do we know that ours is right, more right than theirs, that this is more accurate? It works for us—that's good—but that doesn't mean it's accurate.

My father, I think I talked about this last year, is having a lot of trouble with his eye—macular degeneration, where you lose the sight in the middle. Three years ago now, the eye doctors did a new procedure called a retinal rotation, where they rotated his whole eye about forty degrees so that the part

that could see was more in the right place—I don't know what the right place is. They said, "Oh, you'll see fine." Well, the thing is, he saw everything about forty degrees off-center in one eye, but the other eye wasn't off-center. I tried that—it's really confusing! Is everything now really forty degrees off-center? They said his brain would adjust, which sort of it did and sort of it didn't. But it's as if saying it doesn't really matter if we twist it and see everything off, because the brain will compensate and take it back until it looks the way we're used to having things look. So then I thought, well, what's really out there? What are we really seeing?

If we take that into the moment-to-moment experience in our practice—which is a good place to explore—we can see how, particularly with the body, that's a good place to start. The perception of solid continuity, as the mind gets quieter, at times that's not the perception we have. We're told it seems continuous because of the rapidity of change. The classic story is that if you twirl a torch in a circle really quickly in the night, after a while it looks like a continuous circle of light, but really it's just moving so quickly.

Another way continuity is described has to do with distance. If you look at a line of ants—like marching army ants in Asia—from a distance it looks like one solid stream. When you get up close, you can see all the millions of little moving particles. It's just a shift in perception.

Oftentimes in sitting with our body, people will have different perceptions. It feels like it's all space, or the outline of what we feel as the frame of the body vanishes for a while, or it's just a lot of quickly arising and passing sensations and you couldn't really locate it somewhere, or it feels inflated or compressed, or it feels like you weigh five thousand pounds, or it feels like you're floating. Just altered perceptions. And while none of them last, it's not to say that one is more true than another.

But two things to notice. First, notice how often the quick response that comes up when a different perception arises—something different from what we're used to, what we're comfortable with—is so often fear. It's like a shot of terror: "No, I can't feel like this!" We like, in some warped way, our little boxes of description, knowing how things are, even though that's what keeps us suffering.

So many of us want the breath to be a certain way. We want the meditation to be nice and tidy. We want to be able to note everything, not have it be confusing, have it nice—one thing after another—and know what each thing is, as if that's how the world is. When was the world ever like that? When was anybody's life like that? But somehow we think we should sit down and it's all nice and tidy, controllable.

And when the way we look at the body shifts, those first moments, it's like, "Ah, no, it can't be like this!" It's breaking apart our sense of the known. But then after that, it's not so fearful. And it's not as if once one has experienced, for example, all these little arising and passing molecules in the body, that's another fear: "Oh, how am I going to function?"

If I really see I'm all space, how am I going to be able to pick up the soup ladle and eat my soup? But it

doesn't affect that. It doesn't stay in that perception either. It's like the dinosaurs in The Magic Eye—it just opens up a possibility. It changes something. It has an influence. We're not quite so certain anymore that things are the way we thought they were.

And this is really helpful, starting to bust us out of our unconscious holdings, our unconscious descriptions that keep us from being able to meet experience in a fresh way. Because we already think we know how it is.

So when someone comes in for an interview and says, "I don't know what's happening," that's great. It's when you come in thinking you have to be able to know and describe and explain everything—that's caught. When we don't have a clue, we're much more likely to be able to just meet experience in that moment as it is and see what it has to reveal to us.

With our body, the Buddha said once that if you must identify with something, it's better to identify with the body because as fast as the body changes, the mind is changing so much more quickly. I think he was being tongue-in-cheek. I don't think he was saying you should identify with the body. But just that when we can see how fast the body is changing, the mind is changing a million times more quickly. Yet somehow we identify even more strongly, this kind of clinging to the perceptions and the descriptions of who we are based on mind. I'm the thinker. I'm the feeler. I'm being aware. It just feels natural, doesn't it? But can we look with beginner's mind?

So watching again, going back to perception: notice how from the point of perception—sense contact, consciousness, perception—the sense of me or I arises hundreds or thousands of times in a day. If we don't notice that, we just feel like "I have been experiencing and thinking about these things all day," instead of noticing the papañca arising, the proliferation arising from the particular sense contact and perception.

A simple example: any sense experience. There's the perception of it—it's like we isolate it, dwell on it, associations, memory, I. I was walking outside today, the smell of the autumn leaves. Just a smell. Perception: autumn leaves. That's fine. Memory immediately of my childhood autumns, raking leaves. We were allowed then to have bonfires, before pollution was an issue, and you could burn the leaves.

It didn't stop there. It goes on and on, and pretty soon my whole life is recreated. The sense of nostalgia, the sadness of autumn, the leaves are dying, the winter is coming, life is almost over.

Then I passed the bittersweet—you know, the vine with red berries with the gold around it—which I always associate with an old dear friend of mine who died last year at ninety-five. So immediately: the bittersweet, Mrs. Stenson, old age, disease, and death. It went on the same stream because that's what we do. We isolate a particular perception.

There were plenty of other perceptions. As I think back, I can see the image of the color of the sky, of the dirt path I was walking on, the sounds of the chipmunks. I was aware of all those, but I wasn't isolating

and grasping onto that perception and really going off into the story. So I worked myself into quite a fall-whole-life thing. We do that so easily.

And again, it's selective. It's perceptions and associations and selectively holding on to that—not just seeing bittersweet, memory, Mrs. Stenson, smelling the air, lifting, moving, placing, moving on. Now if you watch, you'll see that we're doing this all day long. All day long. It's not bad. It's just helpful if we know what we're doing, as opposed to believing it all.

It's so exhausting, isn't it? It's just so exhausting to have to be recreating my life story with every fourth sense perception, and noticing how it can always be a different one too.

So at this point it might be helpful to look at what does the Buddha say is really going on? There's the perception, there's the association, there's the thoughts—but what's really happening?

He said: "When in the seen is only the seen, that's it. In the heard is only the heard. In what is cognized—the thought with the mind—is only what is cognized. In what is sensed is only what is sensed. That is all."

That's it. In the seen, there's only the seen. In the heard, there's only the heard.

Can we stand it? Can we stand to be that simple? I don't think so. That's our problem—we can't stand it.

But I have to tell you the rest of the story first. It says, "Through this brief Dhamma teaching of the Lord, the mind of Bahiya of the Bark-cloth was immediately freed from the taints without grasping." In other words, he became an arhat, which we like in these stories.

Then the Buddha went away on his alms round, and in the meantime, a cow with a young calf attacked Bahiya and killed him. So he had this sense of urgency—somehow he knew, right?

The Buddha came back and people said, "Oh, he's been killed," and they made a funeral pyre for him. The other monks were saying, "Tell us, tell us, where did he go?" Because the Buddha, with his divine eye, could see people's rebirths and could tell what level of awakening a person was at.

Now, I like this too. He says to the monks: "Bhikkhus, Bahiya of the Bark-cloth was a wise man. He practiced according to Dhamma and did not trouble me by disputing about Dhamma."

I like that.

And so he says Bahiya was awakened. He doesn't go into what troubling him by disputing about Dhamma would be, but we can only imagine—something other than "in the seen is only the seen" and "in the heard is only the heard." But what about this? And what about that? And what does this mean? You know, it's like complications that assail and overwhelm a person.

So from this sense of the simplicity of perception—and that doesn't knock thoughts out. Thoughts are what

is cognized. We can be aware of a thought. We can use thoughts. That's very different from believing the thoughts that come through and thinking for sure that they're accurately describing ourselves and accurately describing the world. It's very different, and it's quite freeing.

So notice as you go through the day how you take a perception and run, take a perception and go to town with self-definition, self-description, creating the whole context of your world. And notice how, though it feels like the same "me," it's a different story every time. You can flip from sad—"woe is me, I've never had a happy moment in my life"—to being completely ecstatic because you had a really pleasant sitting, or a pleasant three minutes of a sitting, or you got what you wanted for lunch, or you got there before the eggs ran out for breakfast. Whatever it is, just notice that.

And notice when we're in the grip of a particular description, how the awareness snaps shut and we don't recognize conflicting perceptions.

And I have a body that—forget it. I mean, it's not even within the realm of possibility that I would ever be doing that. But they sound like they're having so much fun. So first, the perception will be a kind of "Oh, they're having fun"—mudita. That lasts a minute. Then there's a kind of "Oh, I wish I could do that." And then I flash back to the fifth grade when I was put into the remedial gym class because I couldn't throw a softball far enough—or actually, I forget why. And I don't think of it often, but I see when I flash to it, it's warped me for life. I have this image of my physical capabilities that flashes back to that time.

In that moment, that's all the perceptions of my life that come in. I don't remember any times I was physically happy, or all the fun things I did, or traveled around the world. I only go to throwing softballs, mountain bike riding, remedial gym class, acrobatics—forget it. That's torture for a remedial gym person.

But later, I've completely forgotten about that. I'm sitting and I have a quiet sitting, or I read some inspiring dharma article, and I get completely inspired about the nature of mind and emptiness. I remember the teachers I've been with. I remember being at Ramana Maharshi's ashram. I remember being in Thailand. And I have this whole other sense—which also is me, me, me, you know, I did all these things—but they're completely different from each other.

Watch as you go through the day. It's fascinating how we take a perception, just the simplest perception, and the story could be very simple too. The sound of rain, nostalgic feeling, memories of childhood, and right there it's me again. That's all. Just notice it.

One time when I was on retreat, I was just watching how these stories of me, me, me would go, and I had seen a movie before I started the retreat. So if you've ever done that, you might know how you get replays of that movie over and over and over again. Or if you listen to music, whatever it might happen to be—sometimes it's like anything, if this would only stop.

So anyway, I was seeing Harrison Ford over and over and over again. And then later it would be me. And then all of a sudden I realized there was this fugitive story, and there was the Carol story. One wasn't more

real than the other. It really—and this isn't like a metaphor—it was exactly the same. Just different images, different stories, but emotions would come up, reactions would come up, associations would come up. It was all just completely empty. Only when we hook onto it and make it real and act from it do we get confused and suffer.

But this—even the willingness to possibly come back to the simplicity of "in the seen is only the seen, in the heard is only the heard," not necessarily buying or having to have a description and a context and a meaning for everything—opens us into the unknown, really. It's stepping off the ledge of just being here and opening into the mystery. Not having everything so neatly described in nice little boxes. Not knowing what's going to happen next.

In that moment, it's just totally simple and freeing. There's not even a sense of "I'm freed from something." There's no I to refer back to. It's just a moment of is-ness. That word Stephen keeps using that I can't remember in Pali. That kind of thus-ness. This is how it is. Just this. And this can even be thoughts too. It's not like we hate thoughts. They're just another arising, cognized experience. In the heard, there's only the heard.

I have time, so I just want to mention the three forces that classically are said to fuel so strongly this papañca, this proliferation. They're nothing new, but it's sort of an explanation of why certain memories and associations zoom us off into the past, the future, outer space—while other ones we can really just see. That's fine description. Maybe it is, maybe it's not, and it doesn't grip us.

So the ones that assail and overwhelm us—papañca—are fed by, first, diṭṭhi, of course, which is wrong view or sense of self. Which is obvious, just what I was saying. Take any perception—as I said, the sound of the rain. Add to that how it relates to me, a memory of me, the feeling of me, my third grade, my past, my future. All of that papañca is fueled by a sense of self, some idea of self, however subtle it might be. And that one is kind of at the base of all of them.

That can keep us running for a long time, a very long time. One of my teachers used to say, "The I-thought arises and in the twinkling of an eye, whole universes are created." And it's true, isn't it? Different universes at different times, but in the twinkling of an eye. That's papañca.

The second force that really fuels papañca is—guess what?—craving. Big surprise. Just to give a couple of examples, one way craving actually influences perception is that it is one of the forces that can literally color perception so that we perceive something different from how it actually is. There's a Tibetan saying that craving puts feathers on the object. It kind of pretties it up.

So if you're having a Vipassana romance about somebody, or in your life you get a crush on someone, in that state of desire, of being drawn toward, the person is so entrancing. They're beautiful, they're handsome, they're cute, they're charming. The way they dress, the way they walk—it's all so alluring, and that seems so real. And then when the crush ends, in a day or a week or a month, you come back and

you're looking at the person—not in aversion, but just with clear eyes—and there's that sense of, what was that all about? There's nothing wrong with them, but what was so alluring about the way they walk? Craving can completely color just the basic perception.

And from that perception then, it fuels—you know how strong it is—a moment of craving can generate a whole flurry of thoughts and emotions and memories leading actually to action. So I call it the papañca of action. It doesn't just stop with thought, does it?

I remember one retreat I was doing walking meditation and something was going on with my parents. Suddenly the thought of my parents came up, the desire to go see them, and it just came up so strong that I literally stopped and started walking towards my car. As if I was going to drive to North Carolina! I don't think so, but the craving is just so strong. It drives us. You know those times when you're doing walking meditation with every intention of walking the whole time, until you find yourself in your room sitting there having tea. How did this happen? Papañca of craving. That tea just looks like the most wonderful thing in the world. It drives us.

And the thoughts that were ephemeral before become really solid, don't they? Like concrete. It's really clear that getting to the note board and writing this note is the thing that has to happen. I know it. It's intuitive. It's deep in my gut. This is just what has to happen. It's dharmic. It's so solid. That's what craving does.

The third force that is classically said to really fuel papañca is, again, nothing new: māna, or conceit, which is classically conceit of self. It's similar to the first. But remember, we define conceit as that comparing mind. And I don't think I need to tell anyone here how much thought and energy gets going once that comparing mind has taken root.

As we've said so much, the comparing so often starts with a perception of sight. Faster walker, slower walker, more mindful mover, less mindful mover, better dresser, better yogi. But it's just sight or hearing or smell or whatever. And as soon as that comparing enters and we believe it, a whole landslide of thoughts and emotions and reactions and sense of solidity—of the world, of how things are—is created.

What's so interesting, especially about comparing, as I think I said the other night, is that there's nothing steady-state about it. If anything, it's the one you look at that's the most in flux. With comparing, there's nothing steady to stand on. But somehow we get really caught in that, and it's a major force that feeds papañca.

So just being aware of these forces—not to judge or get down on yourself—it's more to respect the power of these particular torments of the mind. When you find that you have somehow, whether for a moment or half a day, gotten really far afield from reality—we call it yogi mind because it's a little exaggerated, but guess what? It's not just happening in yogis' minds. It's happening in all of our minds in our daily life, a lot of the time.

When you recognize that, without getting into beating yourself up or anything, see if you can just get simple again. You might recognize if there's a force of desire in the heart or mind. You might recognize if comparing has been going on. You might recognize if suddenly you're feeling really strong and solid.

Just recognize it, not any problem. And then come back to the utter simplicity, which is what our practice is. In the seen, there's only the seen.

The Buddha says in a few places that even what the world calls self is in fact unsatisfactory. For no matter upon what we construct ideas of identity, the fact is ever other than that. He didn't say the fact is *sometime s* other than that. Whatever construction we're making of identity, the fact is ever other than that. So forget about it. And of course we can't forget about it, but at least we can say, let me come back to the simplicity. In the seen, there's only the seen. In the heard, there's only the heard. In the sensed, what is sensed. In the cognized, what is cognized.

Can we be that simple? Or to put it as T.S. Eliot says, "A condition of complete simplicity, costing not less than everything." Not less than everything. All our ideas about ourselves, our ideas about the world. It's not that we're living like people with lobotomies who don't know what's going on. It's just that we don't grasp anymore at these ideas. We don't take them for truth. Costing not less than everything. Are we willing to be that simple?

I'm going to close with a passage from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche:

"To understand the uncreated nature of mind, we must go to the source and recognize the origin of our thoughts. Otherwise, one thought gives rise to a second thought, the second thought to a third, and so on forever. We are constantly assailed by memories of the past and carried away by expectations for the future and lose all awareness of the present. It is our own mind that leads us astray into the cycle of existences. Blind to the mind's true nature, we hold fast to our thoughts, which are nothing but manifestations of that true nature. This freezes awareness into solid concepts such as I and other, desirable and detestable, and plenty of others. This is how we create samsara.

But if, instead of letting our thoughts solidify, we recognize their emptiness, then each thought that arises and disappears in the mind renders the realization of that emptiness ever clearer. All phenomena arise like a rainbow, and like a rainbow they are devoid of any tangible existence. Once you have recognized the true nature of reality, which is empty and at the same time appears in the phenomenal world, your mind will cease to be under the power of delusion. If you can leave your thoughts free to dissolve by themselves as they arise, they will cross your mind as a bird crosses the sky without leaving any trace."

Just cross your mind as a bird crosses the sky without leaving any trace. So maintain that state of simplicity. Whatever circumstances arise, do not plunge into either elation or misery, but stay free and comfortable in unshakable serenity.

A condition of complete simplicity, costing not less than everything.

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