Disentangling Your Thoughts

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 55:59

What I want to talk about tonight is the subject of thought.

The first two verses of the Dhammapada, which is one of the books of the suttas, of the sayings of the Buddha—different translations exist, but this is a pretty typical one:

Mind is the forerunner of all actions. All deeds are led by mind, created by mind. If one speaks or acts with an impure mind, suffering follows, as the wheel follows the hoof of an ox pulling a cart.

Mind is the forerunner of all actions. All deeds are led by mind, created by mind. If one speaks or acts with a serene mind, happiness follows as surely as one's shadow.

The power of the mind, the power of thought in our life—as I'm sure I don't need to tell you after you've been sitting here for six weeks—is really amazing. We create our whole world with thought. Just that I can sit here and force air through my vocal cords and make noises and it communicates, hopefully, to you in some kind of sensible way. It doesn't communicate to the two nuns here because English is not their language. It's just amazing how powerful this process of thought is. And I don't need to add how much we struggle with it and fight with it, suffer from it. How much, just talking to people, it seems like the unspoken or unacknowledged goal is to get rid of thinking once and for all.

But when we really look at a thought—and we've said this a lot—what is it? It's just nothing. It just comes out of nowhere. It vanishes back into wherever it came from. It's like a phantom, phantasmagorical. There's nothing to it. So what was that tangle of thoughts that you were hitting your head against the wall about yesterday? It was so real. Where is it now? What was it then?

I find this whole thing fascinating since we suffer from it so much, and I want to talk a little about it. You know that quotation that Stephen and Joseph both read from Kalu Rinpoche about how we live in illusion and the appearance of things. Why? What is this illusion and how do we get so tangled up in it? Why does it seem so real?

A big contributing factor is how we understand—or don't understand—and relate to thoughts, to the thinking process. Often Asian teachers, when we're working with Asian teachers on a retreat, will comment about how much we Westerners think. It really amazes them. We'll take any sensation or experience and explain it and define it and interpret it and make up the story. Actually, we do it with almost every experience, much more than seems to be the case in Asia. "You Americans really think a lot." Yeah, it's true. There will be a sensation, and oh, this is a blockage, it's here from my childhood, it's always how I related to my mother—and just on and on in this whole story. And we're really suffering from it.

And one of us will say, "Well, what's happening right now?" Oh, yeah, twinging.

But just fighting with thought—I don't think it's the answer somehow. Nisargadatta Maharaj says once that if we examine our mind closely, we'll see that it's seething with thoughts. It may go blank occasionally. A becalmed mind is not a peaceful mind. This peace is very brittle, this peace of the blank mind. What you're calling peace is only an absence of disturbance. Real peace cannot be disturbed.

So often I think if what we really are looking for is this becalmed mind, we could just have lobotomies and go home. That's not what it's about.

That's got nothing to do with peace.

So how does this dream world created by thought become so real? Why does it get created in the first place? I want to talk about a couple of different aspects of this.

The first one begins on the basic level of perception. This is where we first begin to get confused. Perception, as we've said, is that quality of recognition, of discernment in the moment. It includes memory, but it's not just memory. If I clap my hands, there's hearing, and when the mind goes, "Oh, clapping the hands," that recognition is perception—present in every moment of consciousness.

Now, the trouble can start right here. It doesn't have to get far from perception at all. The Dalai Lama said once that all of our difficulties stem from mistaken perception. All of them, he's saying. That's why there's so much emphasis on direct experience, on true knowledge. That's what our whole practice is about—emphasis on direct experience.

So what do we mean by mistaken perception? And why do we misperceive? When in the moment of perception, that moment of recognition, there is present in the consciousness any of our friends the kilesas—the afflictions or torments of mind: greed, hatred, delusion, fear, pride, conceit, identification—when any of these, or many others (you know the list), are present in a moment of perception, it distorts the basic perception so that we're not seeing what's actually happening.

You can experience this yourself. You can play with it during this retreat because it's a great time to observe this point of perception. Notice that instant of sense experience prior to recognition, prior to perception. For example, you might know that it's hearing, but it hasn't been recognized yet. You might know that it's smelling, but you don't know it's bread cooking yet. That moment just prior to recognition—and then you can easily see how, if in that moment you happen to be wallowing in a fit of aversion, that really colors how we perceive, how that perception arises.

At this place we teach in California, the meditation building has a big sign on it that says "Perceptory." One woman came one day in a fit of aversion, and she looked at it—she'd seen it a million times—and as clear as day, it said "Purgatory." That's the kind of way that perception is mistaken.

Or imagine, to see how this mistaken perception then leads to a whole string of associations and memories

and ends up in action based on this whole story—imagine being alone at night in an unfamiliar empty house. An empty house can make all kinds of noises. This can happen to me if I don't know the noises and I'm alone and it's at night. Each new banging, cracking noise—there's that moment of just hearing without recognition. And then if I happen to be afraid or nervous, that colors the perception: "Someone's trying to beat down the door!" And I really believe that. That's the explanation. That's the perception. And it leads to a whole series of emotional reactions—fear and judgment. It leads to running around the house, checking all the doors, making sure everything's locked. And then I think, "Oh, well, I guess it wasn't that."

And then there's another noise again. Bang. "Oh, it's mice running around. There's mice, you know." And that builds up a whole story. And that's the truth.

And then it happens again. And I'm looking out the window and think, "Oh, it's just the wind banging this limb against the window." And that happens to be an accurate perception. But each of those previous ones was just as true in the moment—the whole story, the whole reality of thought and reaction and emotion that gets built up from it.

So those are kind of obvious examples about how the presence in a moment of any of these qualities, these torments of mind, distorts perception, and that leads to a whole basic story that isn't true.

The root distortion really is ignorance. Ignorance meaning this confusion, cloudiness, dullness of mind so that we perceive wrongly. Ignorance is an experienceable

It's not like some monolithic thing, unchanging from the beginning of time—ignorance as our given condition that we can never recognize. It arises and passes on a moment-to-moment basis, just like anything else.

I was in Switzerland last summer, walking in the forest with a friend. I looked up through the trees and said, "Wow, look at that—this big yellow and white striped circus tent. I wonder what that's doing here in the woods." My friend looked. It was a rock. Just a big rock with lichen growing on it.

That's a basic distortion of perception from ignorance—just not seeing what's there. The mind pulls out a few bits of perception, puts it together from memory, and simply makes something up. A circus tent. We do this more than we might like to think. That's the problem. That's why there's such value in beginner's mind, where we just see something without having to draw on all our past memories to make it into a little package that fits what we already know.

This experience, this quality, this mental factor of ignorance—we can begin to recognize when it's present, in a dull sort of way. It's like a fog, a sense of dullness, a kind of darkness. You might really want to see clearly, but you just can't. It's foggy and dull. You can't quite tell what's going on. I liken it in myself to those dreams you have in the morning when you're trying to wake up and you just can't. The whole dream is about trying to wake up—that happens to me a lot. Everything's upside down and backwards, and I know everything's wrong, but I can't get out of it. That's what ignorance feels like to me. We can start

to recognize when we're just really zoned out and dull, even though we're trying to be present. It's not our fault; it's just that ignorance is present in that moment.

From this cloudiness, this fogginess, what tends to emerge in our perception is wrong view—confusion, not seeing clearly, like I described with the tent and the rock. The classic example given in the texts, and I like it because it's so straightforward while encompassing all the cloudiness: imagine you're walking in a forest at twilight. You can sort of see, but you can't see clearly. You can sort of see the path, the trees, the big rocks.

It reminds me of when I was a nun in Thailand, staying in a place that was jungle. The paths are broad and you can sort of see, but you can't quite see clearly. There are lots of vines hanging down. You get close and see something hanging from a tree, and as you approach, it appears to be a snake.

In that moment of perception, of seeing it as a snake, that gives rise to thinking about it, to all our associations with snakes. There are lots of poisonous snakes in Thailand, so it can give rise to fear—the emotional reaction that goes with that recognition, the feeling that the woods are unfriendly, the thought that you don't have a flashlight, wondering how you'll get out without being hurt. We get scared, and it affects our whole reaction to the situation.

If someone comes along with a flashlight and turns it on, you see—oh, it's just a vine. The misperception vanishes, and so too does all the reaction to it.

This is what we're doing so much of the time—really, all the time when we're not paying attention—in our perception of who we are. This basic root of ignorance is the fundamental misperception of ourselves. That's what we're hammering away at every night when we're talking.

When we don't really look at our experience, in that fresh way, without assumptions, moment to moment, we usually act from what they call three inverted perceptions—three upside-down, inaccurate perceptions that we don't investigate and assume to be true. They're the three we talk about a lot: we see the permanent in what is constantly changing; we keep thinking we're finding satisfaction where it's not to be found; and we keep thinking there's a solid self-existence when there isn't one anywhere.

It's not just that these are thoughts. These are conclusions and assumptions that we make unconsciously, and we then perceive our experience in that light. From there, the illusion just takes off.

Some misperceptions are easy to see through.

Like, for example, as soon as I saw a rock, I never again could see a circus tent in the rock. When you see that the snake is a vine, you know it's a vine, it's over. But this basic misperception of ourself is much harder because it's so fundamental.

For one thing, it's how we think we've experienced the world and ourself for so long that it's hard to remember to even look at it freshly. That's really one of the points of meditation practice—to learn how to

be fresh with each perception. We take it so for granted we don't even know that we have that assumption. And also, as we've said, the change is so rapid, it's hard to see unless we look really closely.

Not long ago, I was at a printer's, and they were showing me how printing of color photographs works. They took a very elaborate, lovely color photograph and had me look at it through a certain kind of microscope, something printers use. And when you look at the photograph, it completely breaks up. It's nothing but dots of four different colors, and only four different colors of these dots. That's all that photograph was. It was really amazing to see that. Looking that closely, it's clearly nothing but dots. I don't see any kind of solid wholeness to it. In that way, when we look, the veil of our illusion is completely lifted and it's no problem. It's just so clear. It's not that we lose anything because there was nothing solid there in the first place. The fear that comes up about it isn't about actually losing something. It's just a kind of unfamiliarity.

But on the other hand, when I take away that little microscope thing and I look at the picture, I don't see colored dots anymore. It's again this very elaborate, lovely color photograph. And so it's a lot like that with us. Even though I know, I really know from experience that there's nothing solid here—it's just a constant process of mental, physical change arising and passing away—as soon as I'm not really looking, that perception isn't there and I feel really solid. So it really takes this willingness to keep looking.

One of my teachers said that when you look, you don't see anything. There's no problem. When you don't look, you see samsara. That's where we get caught. And that's why our expectations are so blinding, because they're based on our prior conclusions and not on this freshness of seeing.

Another reason it's hard to see through these inverted perceptions—like I'm just using for an example the one of impermanence—is because once we've made these unconscious conclusions on permanence and we perceive things in that light, we tend to ignore or discount perceptions that don't fit in. We've talked about this before, I know, in relationship to emotions, where people will say, "I've been in this one emotion all day." And we'll keep saying, "Well, really, look." And everyone discovers, "Well, I haven't been gloomy all day. I've been gloomy and happy and bored and hungry and sleepy and... oh, gloomy." A lot of people here have reported having that experience.

We can do it on a more subtle level, too. Often people will say, "I really want to explore my emotions, but they just don't last long. I'm doing something wrong." Or they come in really upset and say, "I just cannot sustain attention on any object very long. I have no concentration." But when we probe, we find out, yeah, it's because no object is lasting very long. Things are really changing rapidly. And rather than let in that perception, we try to twist it to fit our previous conclusion that things are solid. When it shakes up our conclusions, our tendency is not to want to let in the perception.

So that's why there's so much emphasis on just being with the bare experience. Whatever definition we make up—and we're making them all up—doesn't last very long. It's never true across the board all the time. When we see that what's true today as a description of your experience has absolutely no relevance

tomorrow as a description of your experience, it becomes a lot easier to let go of the definition and the assumption and just come back to the bare perception. And that is what our mindfulness is all about.

Thich Nhat Hanh says, to have a correct perception, we need to have a direct encounter. So that's what we're doing here—just having direct encounters, moment to moment to moment.

So that's one part—how the illusion, how we get so tangled up in a construction of thoughts, starts with this basic misperception on a moment-to-moment level.

The other part I want to talk about tonight is something I'm sure you've seen: just how amazingly quick the mind is to move from that perception to a whole incredibly elaborate construction of thought and story and emotion and self-identity. Just like that.

I mean, just a cough. Recognition of cough. Depending on the mental state, depending on how much pain there is in your body, depending on your prior conditionings about coughs—in this amount of time, you could have constructed a whole world of yourself in the hospital with pneumonia. You could have constructed a whole sense of what an incredibly insensitive, vile person that is sitting in the other part of the hall coughing. Really solid. And in no time. In no time. Such a solid reality, and it seems really true in that moment.

This process of moving from bare perception of hearing, recognition of cough, to a whole story about the disease process and your history of disease and what you think about people who don't cover their mouth when they cough—this is called *papañca*. It's one of my favorite words. It is translated usually as "proliferation"—this immediate and endless expansion, proliferation, entanglement of thought that arises from perception, where the initial experience is so quickly and so completely hidden by the whole construction that comes on top of it.

The Buddha, in describing this process of *papañca*, is talking about visual consciousness, and then he goes through, as they do in the suttas, each of the six sense doors. He talks about visual consciousness arising when there's contact with the eye, the visual object, and visual consciousness—that's contact. Due to contact arises feeling. What one feels, one perceives—that recognition. What one perceives, one thinks about, has thoughts about. He's just describing this bare process. Out of these associations, these thoughts, *papañca* is manufactured. That's the translation Vimala uses: manufactured. And *papañca* is the proliferation, projection, ideas, descriptions—you name it.

Then, in a loose translation of the next couple of lines: these notions, this *papañca*, assail and overwhelm a person who's not mindful of the process. And it really feels like this. "Assail" is like being attacked, being overwhelmed. It's like you're just completely under the power of these ideas, of this *papañca*. Or as one commentator puts it, it's the tendency of imagination to break loose and run riot. That's really what it feels like when we've been spending five minutes or an hour just struggling with some construction of thought. It really does feel like we're under attack.

This is *papañca*. It gets so solid and so concrete. It's fueled just as misperception arises due to the confusions, the *kilesas* present in a moment of perception. *Papañca* is also fueled by these mental states in the mind.

For example, there's the original misperception based, say, on aversion, which then projects—it's as if it projects the inner experience out onto the object and then fuels our reactions, our emotions, our thoughts.

A simple example: once I was in the hospital, and sometimes when you've been in the hospital a while, you can get into a state that's not quite psychotic but a very distorted state of mind. I was in that, just very fearful. And this nurse came at six in the morning to wake me up, to weigh me. And that's another thing—why do they need to do that? But anyway, I was in a fearful state of mind. And the misperception, the fear, projected onto my visual perception of her, and I really saw her as demonic, as really evil in that moment of her coming. And then that fear proceeded to fuel my reactions and my thoughts, and I ended up just screaming at the poor woman. Really lost in fear.

That's how *papañca* not only distorts perception but continues to fuel our actions. And the next time she came, I was fine—and she was really afraid. I could see it in her face. I felt terrible.

Papañca can be fueled by any of these *kilesas*, any of these habits of mind. There are three particular *kiles as* that they speak of often as being really strong and frequent fuel for this takeoff of *papañca*.

One of them, as we've talked already, is that of wrong view. And as we all know, that's kind of really the basic fuel for *papañca*. Anytime we're referring back to a sense of a separate, solid self, we know we're in for trouble, one way or the other, because we're already out of sync with what's really true. The whole desire for pleasure, the fear of pain—it comes out of this basic fuel: wrong view. And all the thoughts and emotions and actions that follow. I mean, really, if you look at it—if I look at it—how much of my life is driven by this basic form of *papañca*, proliferation based on a sense of myself and wanting pleasure?

So I'm not going to say a lot more about that. It's really our whole practice, exploring that. But a place to really watch the process of *papañca* itself, just to become mindful and aware of the process—and I think this isn't just scientific interest.

It really does lead to not being tangled up in this web of construction.

The second great fuel for papañca is, of course, our other old friend: craving. Really watch how it works. In the moment of craving, the mind projects desirable qualities out onto whatever object is craved—like that Tibetan saying I mentioned the other night about putting feathers on the object, making it attractive. That's the first movement of papañca.

But then watch in your experience how, once craving has entered into perception, it leads to so much mental, emotional, and even physical activity. See how far the papañca, the proliferation, takes us from the bare experience.

For example, something simple: you're sitting, you're pretty present, and suddenly you remember the yogi need request you put in a couple of days ago. You think, "It should be here by now. I really need those cough drops." Suddenly craving comes up. "I've got to have those cough drops. I'm sure it must be here. They've certainly had time to go to Barre Circus by now." Thoughts just proliferate. Emotions proliferate. And it's all you can do to keep from jumping up and running to look at the note board to see if your note is there. You're just sure it's there. In fact, you might even go and read your name on a note that doesn't remotely look like your name, because you're so certain it's there. This is papañca. This is proliferation. It not only leads to constructions of thought; it also proliferates in action.

You'll see when you leave here—if you can even imagine that; you probably can't even imagine it now—you'll feel calm. Things are simple. We do one thing at a time. Watch how fast the papañca moves from thinking into action. Suddenly you have to do this and make this phone call and make this date and go do that and go to the store. It's really amazing to watch how fast it happens.

So here, it's wonderful. You can just watch it in relationship to wanting a note on the board or cough drops or something. But in the world, this type of proliferation based on craving is what leads to solidified nation-state identities. It leads to wars. It leads to a sense of "this is my land, this is your land"—so solid. And at that point, to try and tell somebody, "This is all just proliferation based on craving from a particular sense datum"—forget it. Way too far gone.

Another aspect of craving that I find very interesting to watch is not just craving for things, but craving for becoming. How many different becomings, different definitions of yourself, do you go through in a day? Watch how the proliferation of thoughts begins as we hook into a particular idea, a particular definition, and that begins to really solidify into a becoming. It's so quick and changing, but we keep believing in it. And this too is papañca. It's also a form of craving.

I like to play with it when I'm on retreat. Just notice—I'm sure you all have—how you tell yourself stories all day, describe your experience, make up definitions of what you're doing, on and on and on. What is so amazing is that we keep believing it, on and on and on. And this, again, is papañca.

Notice: you're doing your yogi job, just vacuuming, being very mindful, and the thought comes, "I'm being so mindful. I'm really getting this down—how to be mindful in motion." Pleasant. This is nice. Pride: "I'm doing great." Right then there's craving. It's like a becoming—becoming in that moment a mindful person, a good yogi. And, as we all know, it expands into being the next great spiritual world teacher, being introduced to the Dalai Lama, whatever the particular story is.

That's papañca, that is a total illusion. And in that moment, that's really who we think we are. And the next moment—oh my God, I've been lost in thinking. Unpleasant sensation, aversion, judgment. How could I even think such things? I can't even be mindful of vacuuming for more than two seconds in a row. I'm the worst yogi here.

Or someone said to me, "I have a congenital defect. I can never be mindful. I won't be mindful for more than two minutes. I might as well leave." And that's really solid—a whole tangle of thoughts. And we're making it all up. We're making it all up.

I was sitting in my room back in the Catskills a couple of years ago. Just sitting, as you do, minding my own business. And the thought came up: "Oh, I'm so alone." Kind of neutral. And then immediately it glommed onto something more: "Oh, I'm so alone here. I could die back here. No one would notice for three days. No one knows how lonely..." And not just the thoughts—the emotions came up really strong, a real sense of self, the whole story going on and on.

Suddenly I thought, "Well, since we're making it all up, I think I'll just try a different story." I did this really consciously. So I was still in the "oh, I'm so alone," and I deliberately said, "You know, it's really wonderful to have the opportunity to be so alone." And immediately, all the attendant emotions on that particular thought came up. I started feeling really joyful. I felt so inspired and grateful to have the chance to be so alone for two months in practice.

It was really amazing. Because there was no way I could pretend either of those was true. It was thoughts and emotions—true in that moment, yes, and those were the thoughts and emotions in the moment. But that's all they were.

The Buddha says that if we're going to identify with any part of our experience—which of course he's saying we shouldn't—but if we're going to identify with any part, it would be better to choose the body, because at least it doesn't change so rapidly. He said the mind is changing so much quicker than the body that it's really crazy to identify with that. But that's really where we can so easily get caught.

Again, one of my Indian teachers said, "If you become something, death awaits you. If you don't become something, there is no death or birth." And we're talking moment to moment—becoming and not becoming.

But can we live without self-definition? Can we do that? It doesn't mean to destroy the definitions, but just to see—like when I was sitting back there—that that's all they are. They're just proliferation of thought and emotion and description based on a sense experience. It's very freeing. It can also be scary not to have a sense of definition. Even a bad definition you might like better than no definition.

The third fuel for papañca that's often spoken of is māna, the Pali word translated as conceit. It's not just pride, but as we've mentioned before, this sense of comparing: I'm better than, I'm worse than, or I'm equal to. All of this is this mental factor of conceit. And I know from talking to people that just about everybody here has had real attacks of experiencing this nature of comparison—and just how unpleasant and how much suffering it can be.

It comes up in interviews so much. And it arises about anything, anything. People comparing one breath to the next breath, one sitting to the last sitting. All it takes when conceit is present in the mind is for

someone to walk by slowly. That's it—it's finished. They're slower than me, I'm no good. I'm slower than them, I'm fantastic. Or we're going at exactly the same pace—but they're not one of the people I think is a good yogi, and we're only going equal. Or they're the person I think is a fantastic yogi, and I'm walking just as slowly. And this whole mental activity unfolds from there.

It's very strong, very subtle, this comparison, this conceit. It's said to be one of the last delusionary qualities that goes on our path because it's so subtle and so pervasive. But one thing that weakens it is our ongoing understanding of, our perception of impermanence, of anicca. You can see how that can weaken a sense of conceit, because when we see that everything's changing, there's no solid thing to compare anything to. In walking, for example—oh, I'm walking so slow. But five minutes later, I'm walking fast and they're walking slow. There's no solid thing to compare to. We start to see that everything's in continual flux, and comparison makes no sense because it's just constantly shifting sets of conditions. Comparing absolutely makes no sense when we are seeing things in this state of constantly changing conditions, rising and passing. It really weakens the sense of conceit.

Now, this proliferation, this papañca—again, it's not like we have to get rid of it. The way the Buddha described it, it's a natural process. What one perceives, one thinks about. What one thinks about turns into this whole story of papañca. But then if we're not mindful of it, it really assails us. We really struggle. The thoughts, when we know them for what they are, can momentarily define our reality—and that's actually helpful, especially when we all agree on the definition. It works pretty well, for example, that we pretty much have an agreement on what it means to be a yogi, that at this moment we agree on the definition of reality that I'm talking and you're not talking. You know if you're a yogi, if you're a cook, if you're working in the office. We know what's appropriate behavior for each of those roles. If one of you suddenly got up in the middle of the room and started screaming and dancing and jumping around, it would be really disturbing because it doesn't fit with our agreed-upon definition of things. So the definitions are helpful.

But the key is to know that it's only a definition. In these conditions, right at this moment, you are yogis. But that's not your definition for your whole life. If you thought you had to behave like this all the time, there would be some big problems. If I thought I had to go around lecturing people all the time, there would be big problems too. So it's recognizing the definitions and what they're built on, but not attaching to them. That's the place where we get lost in the illusion and the tangle.

First, it's to see thoughts for what they are, to understand how papañca arises and gets fed and created, and then not to attach to it, not to take it for more than it is. Just because thoughts are powerful, just because they seem solid, just because they're connected with really strong emotions—that doesn't necessarily mean they're an accurate description of anything. We tend to think that the stronger the thought, the stronger the emotion, that must mean it's true. It's just not the case.

There's a story the Buddha told often, one you've probably heard, about a widower living with his young son, five or six years old, in a village in the time of the Buddha. One day some bandits came while the man

was out. They burned down the village, burned down his house, and kidnapped his son. When the man came home, he found the village destroyed, his house destroyed, and the remains of a little corpse that he assumed was his son. He was grief-stricken, just devastated. He saved the little bones in a velvet bag and carried them around with him, grieving and grieving.

Quite some time later, the son escaped from the bandits and came back home. His father had rebuilt the house. The boy arrived about midnight, banging on the door. "Father, let me in! Let me in!" But the man was so convinced of the reality he had constructed that he said, "Go away, don't torment me. My son is dead. Don't torture me in this way." The boy kept banging, the father kept refusing, and finally the child left. They never saw each other again.

The Buddha ends the story by saying: Sometime, somewhere, you take something to be the truth. If you cling to it so much, when the truth comes in person and knocks at your door, you will not open it.

This is the difference between recognizing papañca and proliferation for what it is, and really being caught in it, not recognizing it for what it is. That's all we need. We don't have to get rid of it. We just have to recognize it. That's one way we begin to find clarity and peace in this whole jumble of explanation and confusing experience.

Another way, when the concepts are apparently so solid—and this comes up a lot in interviews—is when there really somehow just isn't space to say

well, maybe my son really didn't die. There's not even space to think that.

Then the key in coming out of proliferation and back to bare experience is just what we've been practicing here: wise attention. Wise attention is a concept of the Buddha based on the fact that we can really pay full attention, give our full attention, to only one thing at a time. So when you're feeling really caught in the papañca, really in a solid concept and struggling, just notice: where is the attention right now? That's why so much of mindfulness is coming back to the direct perception.

An example that's often used, a simile by Buddhist teachers, is that a thought is like throwing a rock. That rock being thrown is like a thought. And if you throw that rock and hit a dog, the dog gets all excited and it thinks the rock is the cause of its problem and it runs around chasing the rock. That's what we do when we're just following out the concepts, following out the thought, the proliferation, running after it like a dog. They say if you throw a rock at a lion, it completely ignores the rock and just stares straight back at the source of the throwing. It cuts through all the extra and gets right back to the source. That's the sense of wise attention—bringing the attention to the direct source of the perception, of the experience. We can do that.

So again, a simple example. You're sitting. A constellation of sensations. They're unpleasant. There's aversion. Again, it gives rise to this whole interpretation: "I'm so blocked. I can never get feeling in this part of my body. I'm such a rigid, blocked person." And you're back into the whole story. "I've got to

release this. I've got to move through this. I've got to transform it." That's just the beginning, and you find yourself in a whole series of struggling and self-judgment and condemnation and comparing and suffering.

If you can, when you notice that, not try to talk yourself out of it, not try to make up a different explanation, but simply go, "Oh, what perception is this arising out of?" And come back and simply feel that horrible sensation that proves what a blocked, dreadful person I am. And just keep coming back, moment to moment. "Oh, yeah, this is burning. This is tightness. This is hardness." Just being with the direct perception without needing to make up a story or an explanation about it.

In that direct perception, you'll notice all the explanations and the papañca that comes flying out. That's fine. Let it fly out and keep bringing the attention back to the direct perception, the bare experience that generated it.

So with mindfulness, we have the ability to know thought, to know proliferation for what it is, to be able to be with the bare perception and know what's actually true, and to tell the difference. We don't need to spend our lives fighting an illusion or lost in a dream. We just don't need to do that. And that's really what we're doing every moment that we're with our bare experience here.

So acknowledge the thoughts. Notice the mental state, the kilesa, that's feeding the proliferation. Notice how much and how fast the proliferation moves and how it leads to action. Bring the attention back to the source, the bare perception. You can even notice, at times, that moment of sense experience before the recognition. Just keep noticing that when it happens. Notice the space between thoughts. Notice the times when we're not lost in a becoming, in an identity, in a definition. Just begin to notice all those times, coming back to the source of all of it—the source that's beyond any of this changing, confusing, unsatisfactory nature of things, the source beyond all the distortions and clingings.

When we are caught in this illusion, when we are not seeing this process of proliferation and instead believing these descriptions to be an accurate reflection of the world, life is incredibly complicated and difficult at times and confusing at times. But in fact, at the level of what's actually going on, it's so simple. It's so simple, it's awesome. Unbelievable. Our mind won't believe it.

This, I think, is a paraphrase of my favorite—I think it's my favorite—sutta of the Buddha.

This man came up to the Buddha while he was on his alms round and begged him to give some teachings. The Buddha said, "Wait until I finish eating. I'll go on my alms round and come back." But the man said, "No, I must have it right now." Finally the Buddha assented, and this is the teaching he gave him. It was a good thing he did, because five minutes later a wild bull came along and gored this man, and he died. But he had this teaching, and it had opened his heart and his understanding, so it didn't matter.

Can we really be that free of concept that it doesn't matter if we die? That's so amazing. The Karmapa is said to have declared on his deathbed: "Nothing happens." That's really extraordinary to me. It's one thing

to talk about these things when we're sitting here feeling mindful and aware. It's another thing entirely to be dying and truly know that nothing happens.

This is the sutta the Buddha offered, expressing just how simple things really are:

In the seen, there is only the seen. In what is heard, there is only the heard. In what is smelled, there is only the smelled. In what is tasted, there is only the tasted. In what is felt or sensed, there is only the sensed. In what is cognized, known with the mind, there is only the process of cognizing.

That is all. Everything else is interpretation. It is awesomely simple.

There's one last quotation, from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche. This reflects the Mahayana view: "Mind creates both samsara and nirvana, yet there's nothing much to it. It's just thoughts. Once we recognize that thoughts are empty, the mind will no longer have the power to deceive us."

What is cognized is just the cognized. That's all.

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