The Illusion of Self

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:08:00

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Doubt is somewhat obvious when it manifests as a thought of "I can't do this," or "this is stupid," or "I don't think they know what they're talking about." But another way that doubt arises in our experience is that it

masquerades as analytical thinking. So we're sitting there, we start to pay attention, and the mind goes: "But that's not me. That can't be me. Is that pain me? If there's no me, how come I feel that pain? How come I have an opinion?" And the mind just starts going and going.

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

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

On a level of moment-to-moment practice experience, as you're sitting or walking and you notice this, the antidote to doubt is sustained attention. If you're thinking about whatever—I'm using no-self as the example since that's what I'm talking about—and you're analyzing, "what about this?" and you notice that, simply label doubt as the hindrance. Then bring your attention to something that's happening. It doesn't matter what, but hopefully not the thought, because you get too sucked in. Come back to the breath. If that's too subtle, come back to a sense of your body sitting, a sense of your seat on the pillow, your hands touching—any physical sensation.

Sound, if that's a clear one for you—but if it's a little vague, you might get sucked back into the thought. Come back to your feet walking.

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

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

On the level of what gives us the energy to do that—beyond the moment-to-moment practice—we have to come out of our usual way of trying to figure things out. This is beyond just doubt. It's a willingness to move from our reliance on knowledge, from our reliance on reasoning, to surrender into whatever's happening without prior expectations. In a way, you could call this faith. Faith is another strategy for being with our experience, one that's different from knowledge.

I'm going to give you two definitions of faith. It's a word that—I don't know how you all relate to it, depending on your backgrounds and conditioning. For me, I didn't have much of a religious upbringing.

Being Protestant, we went to church and all, but somehow it didn't seem to stick or really have much impact. So my association with the word faith was more secondhand, more the demand for belief—belief in what somebody told me, belief in a particular doctrine or a particular person. Of course, my logical mind would want proof, but faith seemed to demand following and believing without any kind of proof, without anything to rely on.

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

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

Faith is a kind of combination of confidence and trust. Trust that allows us to be willing to be with our experience without expectation, without need for payoff or justification, without knowing what's going to happen or having a preset idea. And confidence is the strength, the willingness, the fearlessness that lets us meet experience without any kind of promise. It's what lets you sit here and be with an unbearable pain in your knee. There's no promise that anything wonderful is going to happen from that. But there's some confidence and some trust that allows one to do that. Hopefully it's not blind faith. Hopefully it really begins to come from our own verified experience—confidence based on verified knowledge. But knowledge here means intuitive knowledge, not the kind of knowledge I grew up valuing as the highest truth, as the point of safety and the place of finding self-worth and self-value.

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

Sometimes this sense of a body of knowledge—which can certainly be very useful; I'm not talking about throwing out all knowledge—becomes a bastion against insecurity. A way to avoid having to live and dance in what's actually true: the constancy of unknowing, the fact that we never know what's going to happen, even in the next moment. For me, and I'm probably not the only one, certain sets of knowledge can really serve as a comfort, but it's a way to hide. Even without wanting to use it that way, with that

sense of security, we really can identify with the knowledge, and it blocks our potential or our willingness to perceive other possibilities, to open to another possibility at all.

There's a story the Buddha told that illustrates this. A widower, a poor peasant, had a young son and lived in a small village of huts. The father had gone away for the day, and while he was gone, some bandits came and destroyed the village, burned all the huts, killed the people. But they kidnapped his son and took him away. The father comes back, finds everything destroyed, finds some bones he thinks are his son's. He weeps, so distraught, so upset, certain this is what happened. He took the ashes and wore them in a little bag around his neck, and was just devastated, unable to recover.

Rebuilt his house and was living, but was just totally miserable—yet had totally bought the story that this is what happened. That became knowledge: these bandits came, destroyed the village, killed my son.

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

It's a heart-wrenching, exaggerated story. But it makes the point of how locked we can get in knowledge, in what we think is a true description. It blinds us to being able to even explore—to even stick his head out the window and say, "Oh yeah, maybe it could be my son, let me check it out."

This is what we're doing all the time. Assumptions of who we are, what Joseph was talking about last night in our assumptions of time, our assumptions of past and future, our assumptions of body—all of that keeps us locked in.

What this quality of faith offers—the confidence to meet what's happening with a trust to enter it unknowing, really fully—is that it lets us meet experience freshly.

What I've found in my practice, and in talking with other people, is that I've approached it wanting to find the answer. What's the truth? I'm basically looking for another explanation, for another set of knowledge, because that's what the mind knows how to do. I think, well, okay, maybe this understanding isn't right, but if I find another perfect explanation, then I can rest in that.

But the more I look, with just the simplicity of mindfulness, into the knowledge we have, the more it seems to break apart. And instead of more answers, we find more mystery.

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

Way. Big, big.

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

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

It's like us. It's the same, actually. What did Joseph say? All our matter is not the size of a particle of dust. But we can't just take that on word value. It's funny, but it doesn't mean anything until we verify it ourselves.

What we need is the faith, the willingness to try, that will keep bringing our attention into our experience—to really look, to really meet it, to really be willing to open into the possibility of the unknown.

And of course, since this faith is based on our verified experience, when you first come to a retreat like this, your first retreat, you can't have that kind of verified experience. The question often comes up: what got you here the first time? It comes up in my mind for anybody who comes on a first retreat.

But there's a quality talked about, that before there can be verified faith, there's a quality of mind called bright faith. In some way, something in us is lit up by a quality we experience in someone else. It might be someone you talk to, and either something they said kind of lit up this something indefinable, indescribable in us that gets us to say, "Well, maybe that's worth a try." Or some quality in the person, something you read, something you observe in how certain people behave—whatever it is. Something got each one of you here.

When there's this quality of bright faith, it's like a brightness, an energetic quality of mind and a willingness to look. And if you came without that, it would really be hell.

Because it would be so hard, especially in the first few days, without something inside of us—that yearning towards what cannot be described—that keeps us looking, that keeps us coming back to the practice, beyond the reasoning intellect.

But this kind of bright faith is not sustainable. It's really based on looking outside of ourselves for verification or for strength or for confidence. And that can't be sustained when you hit a really difficult patch. When you start a retreat and your first really difficult patch comes before any kind of bright patch

has arrived, it's really hard, because there's no personal experience yet to give us the confidence with which to meet this, to trust that it's somehow worthwhile.

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

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

Just one little experience of sitting with pain, and then seeing that you can just be with it, and all the fear and all the aversion either fades, or you see the difference between the aversion and the pain, and you see that the pain itself is not suffering. Even if it's just for a second, that is an insight, a sense that things are different from how they seem on the surface. And even such a moment can somehow energize us for days, which is lucky, because sometimes we just get a couple of little moments of insight like that, and many more moments of being caught in the seemingly ordinary way our mind has of relating to experience. Because that seemingly ordinary, normal way has been conditioned throughout our entire life, so much more deeply.

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

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

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

Gradually, what this quality of faith I'm trying to describe enables us to do, or opens us to, is to much more consciously be able to enter into each moment knowing that we're entering totally into the unknown. Maybe when you came on this retreat there was a sense of that. Somewhere in the unknown—"I don't have a clue what's really going to happen here. It's something I've never done." But what's actually the case is that this is true of every moment of our life. We think we know.

It's funny—I'm talking about opening to the unknown in every moment, and we have this incredibly rigid schedule where almost every moment of the day is planned. If I say, "Two thirty-five, where are you going

to be?" you'd answer, "Oh, I'll be in the meditation hall, sitting on my pillow." Maybe. Probably.

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

What amazes me is coming home. After a couple of weeks, I have my day book, and I have my hours planned, and I look at it, and mostly that happens. That's what really amazes me. I can tell you where I'm supposed to be on August 15th of next year. And probably there's a good chance that might happen, which is amazing. It's really amazing. But it sustains the illusion that things are under control.

And then it stopped. I said, okay, well, that was neat. That's fine. But what didn't stop was a series of aftershocks, like every three minutes, every five minutes, for the next at least twenty-four hours. And then, with decreasing frequency, for the rest of the retreat. Where I had felt like I really handled it with great equanimity—very present, seeing things change, no attachments—those aftershocks really got to me.

Because the one thing I always felt I could depend on was the ground beneath my feet. You know, the weather might change, relationships might shift, but at least the ground stays still. And suddenly that was gone too. There was nothing solid to fall back on.

This is what practice reveals to us, again and again. We think we've let go of one thing, and then we discover we've simply transferred our sense of security to something else. It's like a game of finding the next resting place, the next solid ground. And mindfulness shows us: there is no solid ground. There never was.

This doesn't mean we live in a state of perpetual anxiety. That's not the point. The point is that our usual strategy—finding something solid, something unchanging, something we can count on—that strategy doesn't work. It never actually provided the security we thought it did. We were always living in this groundless reality; we just weren't paying attention.

When we sit in meditation and experience the body dissolving into sensations, the breath arising and passing, thoughts appearing from nowhere—we're not creating groundlessness. We're simply seeing what was always true. And there's something liberating in that, even though initially it can feel terrifying.

The question becomes: can we learn to be at ease without a resting place? Can we discover a different kind of stability—not the stability of finding something solid, but the stability of being present with what is, however it changes?

By the end of a night of aftershocks every three minutes—and of course the radio kept saying there was a twenty-five percent chance of the big one coming in the next three days, which just puts that thought in your mind, *is this an aftershock or is this the big one?*—by the end of twelve hours of that, my nerves were

a wreck. Every time a shock would start, our heater would rattle loudly, so it couldn't just pass unnoticed. We'd hear rattle, rattle, rattle every two minutes.

I came out of that experience deeply feeling this sense of how unquestioningly I had relied on the earth to be there for me—to be solid, to be someplace I could just rest. The worst that can happen, you think, is you fall on the earth. But to viscerally get it over and over—sorry, not that one either—it really touches into this sense of anattā, of not-self, and the fear that comes from ongoing insecurity. Not quite franticness, but the mind wanting to find somewhere to land. It's not okay hanging out in nowhere, trying to take a stand.

But actually, it's not even the movement. It's not the inability to take a stand that's the problem. It's not the never knowing or the unknown. The problem is that sense of "I" that's there in the midst of the unknown—that "I" arising, clinging to whatever, positing a need for security. The aftershock's not a problem. What it's doing to me is the problem. *Where am I going to find security?* is the problem.

When we're just opening into the moment as it is, there's no problem. If you had even one moment today where it was just pure beingness—maybe it was hearing, maybe smelling, maybe warmth—where there was no discursive description, no trying to figure anything out, no trying to name the species of bird, just simple being—in that moment, where's the problem? There's no needing to know what's going to happen next. There's no referring back to someone it's happening to. There's no needing to know what happened before. It's just this moment. And in that, without the obsessive, ongoing referring back of every sense experience to a sense of self, with just the pure experience, there isn't any problem. Whatever needs to occur in the next moment, the next moment occurs. If some response needs to happen, that also occurs. We don't need to figure it all out ahead of time.

This sense of pure being doesn't mean—which is one of the questions that comes up a lot—*if there's no self, then how am I ever going to do anything? Who's going to do things?* We can talk about this sense of pure being and say, well, that's really nice, but what about if it starts to rain and there's lightning and you have to get up and go inside? Actually, the two have nothing to do with each other. There's a sense of being, and then there's a sense of being with lightning, and then there's a sense of a thought arising: *It could kill me. I think I'll go inside.* That could be done with or without clinging to a sense of self. It can just be clear seeing.

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

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

think we had. A sense of fear, even terror, can arise.

And that's fine. We don't like fear very much, but the fear itself doesn't mean something's wrong. Often fear, as we touch it in our practice, is really more like a messenger that we're moving into unknown territory. Rather than being afraid of the fear—again, we have to have some confidence and clarity of practice—we can just meet the fear as another arising emotion, be with it, see it come, see it go. We don't have to take it as a messenger of doom. We don't have to take it as evidence that something must be going wrong. Often it means something's going really right, and we're hitting the place of our unquestioned assumptions, which are beginning to break down.

We don't always understand that rationally, but that's the process that's unfolding.

So, to begin to use our practice in this way—I find it really fascinating. It's one of the ways I truly love to explore when I'm on retreat: to consciously use mindfulness to explore the actual sense of "me" or "mine" when it's arising in a moment.

Everything I'm going to say now about exploring it comes from what I've discovered in my own investigations and in working with others. But I'm not sharing this so you'll take it as another explanation. Hopefully it will simply spark your interest to look and explore on your own. And never take any answer that your mind arrives at—"Oh, this is what the self is" or "This isn't what it is"—as a final resting place. If you can keep that interest alive, keep that childlike innocence, that trust, to keep meeting the data, keep exploring without stopping at any assumption that now you know what the self is or isn't—then you can really begin to look.

What we begin to see, what I begin to see, is that what seemed so solid and unquestioned... it's not that we're destroying the ego through our practice or getting rid of the sense of self to substitute something else. It's that we begin to see that what seemed so solid is nothing. There's nothing solid there at all. And in touching a sense of anatta—which is the Pali word for no separate self—and losing the sense of self, we don't actually lose anything. It's not like something changes and we can't function, because it's not there in the first place. It's just that our perception has been inaccurate. We're interpreting perceptions inaccurately, and that's all that's going on.

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

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

willingness to keep looking.

So we look, and we see that when you have this feeling of "I," of "mine"—however it manifests—it might just be the thought, "I'm really hungry." Or it might be, "I'm bored now. I wish this talk would end. I wonder what I'm going to do tomorrow. My knee hurts." It doesn't matter the content. But when we have that sense, when you notice it there, rather than focusing on the object, see if you can—and your mind needs to be somewhat quiet for this, obviously—see if you can turn your attention back on that "I" or "mine." The actual experiential feeling or thought or emotion, whatever it is. In that moment, what are you calling "mine"?

We might be focused on "I'm hungry" and actually be focused on the feeling of hunger or wanting food. But that might not be the actual sense of "I" who is hungry. Sometimes we're so accustomed to that "I" feeling, it just seems like it's always there, so we overlook it. When your mind is a little quiet, it can be really wonderful—I really love this—turning around the attention and seeing, "Well, what is 'I'? Who is 'I'?" I don't mean investigating with thought, but with this sati, this mindfulness, that just lands right on that feeling of "I" to see what it actually is.

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

So when there's that sense of "I"—"I'm hungry. I want this. This hurts. I want this to go away"—turn around and see what experience is being grasped and clung to.

Don't even assume it's being grasped and clung to because I say it. Turn around and feel and see for yourself.

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

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

But turning and looking, what's been really liberating for me is that each time it's something different.

There isn't, so far, some thing there, or some emotion, or some experience, or some anything that's "I." And that's what gets really fascinating—to begin to see. If you can see it, if it's something that one can experience right away, it's an arising and passing phenomenon. There's no continuity to it. There's no ultimate solidity. It's clearly not self. So just beginning to explore in this way.

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

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

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

The second aspect of experience that often becomes the grasping point of self is what is called feeling tone. The other night I spoke about how each sense experience we experience as either pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, which can come quite subtly. Usually from pleasant we move right away to wanting more, from unpleasant we move to aversion, and from neutral to spacing out. But often we don't notice that feeling tone because it's quite subtle. This is one of the five aggregates that makes up what a human is—one that we easily fail to notice, that we identify with, that we cling to.

Say there's a pain in the knee, and it's unpleasant. You might really be looking at it, mindful of sensation, really seeing the sensation, and there's not a sense of "I'm that sensation." But somehow there's a real sense of involvement and self-identification there, and you can't quite figure out where. You're clear you're not the pain. Often the clutching is around that subtle feeling of unpleasantness, of pleasantness, of neutrality. I mention this as something else to notice. It creates that real sense of separation. Sometimes we don't notice that feeling at all.

The third aggregate, which Joseph also mentioned last night, is consciousness itself—the knowing faculty, which seems ever-present and very subtle.

And that is easy. I think in some ways that's the last one we identify with. It's the most subtle and the most

difficult to see as separate from me. I know hearing. I know that I'm paying attention. I know that there's unpleasant feeling. I know that there's awareness. It's easy to think of that as "I."

So without saying it is or it isn't, just notice if that's where this sense of I or me or mine is landing.

The fourth area is perception, which Joseph talked about again last night, and which is another really fascinating area to explore. Because we can really begin to see, sometimes in simple ways, how easily we identify with our perception, take it as true, and then how something else can come in and we can say our perception was totally whacked out. It had nothing to do with what was going on, but we would have defended it to the death. Yes, this is how it is.

Just a little example. The other night, about two nights ago, I was sleeping with the window open for the first time. And I woke up in the middle of the night with some weird stuff going on in my body. You know, that kind of weird, vulnerable, not quite—you haven't quite put all the pieces together yet—state when you wake up in the middle of the night like that. So I was just lying there. And I gradually became aware of this really loud roaring noise, just so loud coming in. First thought: well, that must be the river. But I didn't really have too much confidence in that thought, in that perception. And it just seemed to get louder and louder, with all these undertones and currents. I thought, I've been here for five days, and this is the third year I've been here. I never heard the river sounding like that. There's no way that can be the river.

And then I remembered when I was a nun for a while in Thailand and I was staying at one place that was in the forest, on a small river deep down in a gorge. And one night, all of a sudden, just like that, this tiny little river got huge. It came all the way to the top of the gorge. It flooded our whole area and it made so much noise. It was unbelievable. So I thought: either there's some weird mechanical kind of plane or tank coming in here, or this river is flooding, and it must be totally up to the porch by now.

And I was absolutely convinced of that, because my perception was that I had never heard the river be that loud. Impossible.

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

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

And the last area is everything else. I sometimes think that's kind of how the Buddha did it—all these categories, and then there's one that sort of lumps in so much. It's called mental formations. So it includes what we're doing today in the instruction: intention.

Intention is a really interesting one, because you can see how subtle it is. Intention to move, intention to

do something, intention to direct the mind in a certain way, intention to come back to the breath, intention to move to hearing. And it's so easy to feel like, that's me. Well, who's meditating? Who's paying attention to the breath? Where does this intention come from, if not from me?

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

But explore it. And that's where I mean don't stop. We turn to intention.

It feels so much like us, there can be a tendency to stop really looking. And then we move into, "Of course it's me. What else could it be? And where could this intention come from?" And we're back into that spinning mind of doubt again. So exploring intention is essential.

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

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

One time, a couple years ago, I was on a two-month retreat, and it got really clear to me. I had just seen a movie just before the retreat, which—if you can avoid that, or listening to music just before a retreat, I'd advise avoiding it unless you want to really watch the replays for a long time. So I had seen The Fugitive. At least it wasn't too bad of a movie—it could have been worse. But I'd be sitting there and I'd be getting flashes of scenes and dialogue and this and that of the fugitive, not of course in order, jumping forward and back in time.

And then after a while, it hit me. That would go for a while, and then it would switch, and the Carol movie would come on, and there would be flashes of memory and future planning and images of myself and

things that happened, forward and back in time. At some point, it hit me. It wasn't like they were correlated, like a simile. They were exactly the same. There wasn't any difference. It wasn't that the Carol story was more real at that moment than the flashes of memory from The Fugitive. Not at all. It was just images coming up and thoughts. But there were particular ones that there was a sense of grasping, a sense of identification around. And so I made that Carol. I didn't think I was, you know—I can't remember his name—but I didn't think that was who I was. I knew that was a movie.

Well, guess what? So's the other.

It doesn't mean that I don't know what happened in the past and that I can't relate. But in that moment, what was really happening was just images arising, thoughts arising, emotions arising, and passing. And whether it was about Carol or what's-his-name, it really wasn't any different.

And that's what we're doing all the time. We're telling ourselves stories. There's thoughts. We don't notice which ones we clutch at and make a story of and the other ones that go by. So pay attention. See which ones

You grasp at a sense of self around certain thoughts while others simply pass by. Just because there's a grasping sense of self around some thoughts doesn't necessarily make them true. I want to point that out.

In fact, often—not with everybody, but for many people I talk to in retreats—the tendency can be to really identify with the negative ones, the negative self-images, the ways we're not good enough, our failings. And if something beautiful happens or we have some beautiful experience, and a thought arises, "Well, I'm really a very kind person," the mind comes in right away: "Don't get too carried away with yourself. Remember when you did this? You didn't give that." And we think, "Oh yeah, that's right. Thank you for bringing me back to truth." Because we're buying into a particular story.

It's all just thoughts. Imagine the freedom, the spaciousness, of not having to grasp and solidify around any of them.

This is another way we can approach exploring the sense of self. The way I've been talking is really the way of precision—being with the breath with precision, bringing your attention precisely into the experience of "I" or "mine." We can also approach it from the way of spaciousness, somewhat like being with hearing. At times we tune into whatever word you want to use—spaciousness, awareness, or emptiness, which is really the more classic term. Things arise and pass. Emptiness doesn't mean nothing is happening, but it's empty of clinging, empty of aversion and grasping, empty of self. And in that openness, without looking for anything—just as Joseph was describing with cars going by, not looking for anything—when the sense of grasping arises, the sense of clinging, the emergence of self, you really can't help but notice it when you're attuned to the emptiness.

I'll give an example. One time I was on a self-retreat in a really lovely spot in California. I was sitting high up on a hill, just as you were doing today, hopefully—just sitting and being aware with my eyes open.

Nothing particular, just spaciousness and peace and everything coming and going. Really beautiful, no thoughts of "me," just presence.

Some turkey vultures came flying out, really close because I was so high up. "Oh, that's far out." There wasn't really any clinging, just "that's far out"—another arising experience, spaciousness, peace. Of course, somewhere in it a thought arose: "This is really far out. I'm so empty, I'm so spacious." But that came and went too.

More turkey vultures came, and they started circling. All of a sudden they were circling right over me, getting closer and closer. And suddenly the thought arose: "I'm the thing they're circling. They think I'm dead." I had this moment of genuine panic. It only lasted a moment, but it took everything I had not to stand up and scream, "I'm alive! I'm alive!" It was really interesting.

In that moment, the emptiness, the spaciousness, the no-sense-of-self, the real freedom and ease—it vanished, just like that. Total contraction. Solid sense of me and other, fear, something to do. That's how it is.

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

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

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

So really seeing the arising and passing of this sense of self, not being content to stop anywhere, but keep exploring—watch it come, watch it go.

And in each experience of that, the old conditioning, the old assumptions begin to weaken. And without logically knowing it, we begin to experience much more of an ease with what comes and goes in our life, with what comes and goes in our emotions, with what comes and goes as experience. Just an ease in the dancing with things.

It's not that stuff disappears, but it's that sense of *I*, that constant self-referencing that begins to ease—that

we don't take so seriously, that we see through altogether. And in that comes a real sense of joy and dancing.

I just want to end with this from a Tibetan Lama:

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

So let's just do nothing.

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