Perception and Thought

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:03:45

I want to speak about the nature of thought and how we tend to get wrapped up in something that is so completely ephemeral—how much of our experience at times in meditation comes to seem like a battle with this experience of thinking, with the process of thought.

So often it's almost as if someone will come in and evaluate their practice by how many thoughts they had or the quality of the thoughts, and thinking assumes this incredibly solid, suffering aspect of experience. How does it come to be that way?

Certainly thought is useful. We wouldn't deny that if we understand the nature of thought, we can certainly use it. The process of thought, of course, got each of us here. Without thought, these noises I'm making with my mouth wouldn't really be able to make sense when they come into your ear. It's quite amazing, the process of thought. But how does it come to be such a struggle?

Because if we really look at a thought, just the thought itself, what is it? How much substance does a thought have? How much power does a thought have? If you're looking at the thought itself, it's nothing. It's less than a cobweb. There's just nothing there.

Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche says: "Like waves, all of the activities of this life have rolled endlessly on, yet they have left us empty handed. Millions of thoughts have run through our minds, but all they have done is increase our confusion and dissatisfaction. When a rainbow appears, we see many beautiful colors. Yet a rainbow is not something we can clothe ourselves with or wear as an ornament. It simply appears through the coming together of various conditions. Thoughts arise in the mind in just the same way. They have no tangible reality at all. There is therefore no logical reason why thought should have so much power over us, nor any reason why we should be enslaved by them."

Helpful, right? No logical reason when you look at it, because there's nothing there. Once we recognize that thoughts are empty, the mind will no longer have the power to deceive us. But as long as we take our deluded thoughts as real, they will continue to torment us mercilessly, as they have been doing throughout countless lifetimes.

It feels like that sometimes, doesn't it? It feels like just in the five weeks here, you've gone through countless lifetimes of thoughts tormenting us.

So I want to talk a bit tonight about directing our attention to thought itself and seeing some of the ways that it seems to become so solid. The obvious way we get enslaved is through a combination of perceiving wrongly and unwise attention. In other words, we don't look at the thought itself, but we get completely

seduced and believe in the content.

Why is the thought of judging so painful? Just "I'm a stupid jerk"—there's nothing to that. If you see it just as thought energy... We really give it power by identifying and grasping at the content, and then we suffer. And we don't seem to notice that the content can be totally opposite from one thought to the next. We still continue to get seduced in this way and really suffer.

A friend told me he heard Andrea Levine say at a workshop, speaking about the unreliable nature of our thinking mind. She said, you know, for example, your mind will say, "Oh, have another piece of chocolate cake. You'll really like it. It'll be good for you." So you eat it. As soon as you've finished: "I wouldn't have done that if I were you. It's not really so good for you. You're really kind of giving into craving." And we believe in both. And we suffer.

Really, one of the revelations of our continued exploration in practice is that we don't have to be afraid of thinking. You don't have to make the ending of thought the goal of your practice, the ideal of freedom and peace. First, that's a waste of time—it won't last even if you do manage to get there. And second, it's still giving thoughts this power.

So can we begin to just explore their ephemeral nature instead?

One way to start at the very beginning of the arising of a thought—one way that we get so far afield from just the basic simplicity of experience, "you're a stupid jerk," a thought arising, gone—is through misperception.

I know Joseph spoke a little bit about the factor of perception in his talk the other night. Perception meaning, quite specifically in Buddhist psychology, this quality that arises in each moment of consciousness of recognition, of discernment. It involves memory. So, for example, there's hearing, and it can be like a quick moment pre-perception, and then—ah, the bell. Even the words "the bell" might not form, but there's a knowing, a recognition: that's a bell, or *the* bell. Or you might recognize it's a bell, but not *the* bell. It's a different bell, and I don't know which bell that is. But you still recognize the general quality "bell." Or if we're really clear, if there's no delusion in the mind, there could be a sound, and we recognize: I don't know what that is. That's also, in a way, perception.

One of the ways that we get so lost in thinking begins with misperception—perceiving wrongly. The Dalai Lama said once that all of our difficulties stem from misperception. That's why there's so much emphasis on direct experience or true knowledge. That's exactly our whole practice. The whole emphasis of mindfulness is on direct experience, and each moment of direct experience cuts through misperception.

So I'll give some examples of what I mean. How do we misperceive? It's one of the ways that our old friends—greed, hatred, and delusion—manifest in our moment-to-moment experience. If any one or some friendly combination of these three is present in consciousness in a moment of contact, in a moment of perception, and we're not aware of it, it can completely color or distort the perception so that we actually

perceive what is not there. This is one of the functions of ignorance. Our perception is distorted through the lens of whichever one of these *kilesas*, these torments of mind, is present.

Here's an example—this happens in our life all the time. What's scary is that mostly we don't recognize it. We really think, "This is how I'm seeing things."

One time I was in the hospital. I'd been there some days, and they give you drugs because I was in a lot of pain. After some days I started to get into a weird mental state. I later heard there's something called ICU psychosis, where your mind is just a little gone for a while. Well, I was in this incredibly fearful, aversive mental state, not quite recognizing it. And a nurse came at six in the morning to wake me up and weigh me—very important to know how much I weighed. I woke up totally in fear and anger, and I visually perceived her as demonic. I mean, her face, the way she looked—like an evil demonic creature. Which is how I responded to her, because we respond from how we perceive. This is the way misperception continues. I think I really yelled at her and pushed her away.

The next day, when I was in my more normal state of mind, the poor same lady had to come and wake me up at six o'clock to weigh me. And I could see she's a perfectly nice-looking lady—only she looked really scared on this day. And I felt really badly.

If I hadn't seen her the second day, though, really how I saw her that first day was how she was. We really believe—we don't know this misperception is happening. What's scary is how much this is actually going on in our experience, and it leads us to all sorts of action.

As Thich Nhat Hanh says, "When you look at a pencil, you perceive it, but the pencil itself may be very different from the pencil in your mind." This is the basic misperception. And it can be through any of the *kilesas*, but of course the root distortion, the root cause of misperception, is confusion or ignorance, delusion—just not seeing what's there.

It can seem relatively benign. We just see something, don't really recognize it, but instead of knowing we don't recognize it accurately, the mind sort of reaches into past memory and makes something up—that that must be what it is.

I remember once I was walking up on Hoes Hill Road, on the dirt road off of that, and I looked over to the side in the woods. I saw this kind of cliff with a lake of snow, melted snow, at the bottom. I got really confused because, you know, I've lived here for twenty years and I'd never seen a cliff down there right off the side of the road. I started getting extremely disoriented and confused and upset. Then I stopped, went back, and looked again. It was just a puddle with reflections from the trees and the sky in a certain way that, unrecognized, my mind just made up into the closest thing it could get to. That's the way delusion or ignorance functions to distort perception.

And it can take us much further than that.

I was in Vancouver teaching a course, staying alone in a friend's apartment. I was reading at night a book about the civil war in Beirut, and just as I was going to sleep in this unfamiliar apartment, I started hearing these big booming sounds going off. There was no holiday or anything, and these big explosions kept happening. First I just went and looked out the window, couldn't see anything. And then I thought, well, it's mortar fire, it must be, because it's not a holiday.

My mind went into this whole thing: just because it's Vancouver doesn't mean that something like that couldn't happen. What makes you think it only happens in Beirut? What makes you think you're safe just because you're in the West?

I kept running from window to window. I actually turned on the radio and tried to listen to see what was happening. And then because nothing was on it, I thought, well, they always go to the communication centers first and they're lulling us into being relaxed. Really, they've taken over—I don't know who "they" even were—but they've taken over the city. This went on for twenty minutes or so, and I was working myself into quite a state.

Finally—I never actually saw it, because if I'd seen what it really was, it would have broken through right away—I went out to the front room and looked over toward where the World's Fair had been some years ago. And it just clicked. I said, "Oh, I bet there were fireworks," even though it was no holiday. I just knew it was fireworks. It's that kind of sound. And the whole thing dropped away.

It was funny, you know. I could laugh about that one. It didn't go any further. But that's how a misperception—and we really think we know—leads to action, to not seeing clearly. The thoughts that come out of the misperception are very strong and solid. We really identify with them and we act. This is our basic delusion.

It's fine when we can recognize it. It's great when we can recognize it. Would that we could recognize it more often than we do.

The delusion part is that sense of not being able to recognize, not being able to know something for what it is—like being in a fog. Or like times, I don't know if it happens to you, but it happens to me a lot: I'll be driving and just all of a sudden have a moment of complete blankness where I don't know where I am, what country I'm in, what season it is—just completely blank. I could look around, and even though it's Barry, I can't recognize anything. It can last for a moment or two until I can find something in that present moment to glom onto. "Oh yeah, oh yeah, right, this is the white car. That belongs to IMS. I must be here now. That means it's the three-month course"—some line of logic like that.

That's just a moment of delusion. Unrecognized, what it leads to is wrong view—misperceiving and then acting on it, as I did when I was in Vancouver.

And of course the basic wrong view, the basic misperception that underlies most of the confusing and painful things that we get ourselves involved in through thought and through action, is the misperception

of ourselves. It's the misperception of our moment-to-moment experience that gives us the perceived sense that we're solid, we're separate, we're sort of unchanging through time.

While some perceptions are easy to see through—like the puddle in the woods or the war in Vancouver—some perceptions are much more difficult to recognize as inaccurate. One of the reasons our misperception of ourself is so difficult to see through is because things are happening so quickly. That's why there's such an emphasis, I think, on the insights into anicca, into impermanence. Because when things happen so quickly, it seems solid—like if you spin a torch really fast at night, it looks like a solid circle.

So it might be fine that Buddhist psychology tells us there are seventeen trillion mind moments in the blink of an eye, and that they're all discrete, happening one after the other. And that what seems like a solid body I have, continuing in time, is actually just a series of elements arising and passing, arising and passing. Or that what we call our whole sense of "me" is just a sight, a sound, a smell, a taste, a thought—just happening, arising and passing so quickly.

But that doesn't really help us that much, to read that or to be told that. I can say, "Yeah, that makes sense." But my perception, moment to moment, is that I'm really solid here. And I can feel like I extend back in time as far as I can remember.

So if we don't really look, we find that even if intellectually we want to believe something other, the inaccurate perceptions that are happening—that we don't recognize—are actually forming the assumptions and conclusions we draw about who we are, about our moment-to-moment experience.

Again, that's why our practice is about direct encounter—directly meeting experience over and over and over, without assumption. And it's not so easy, because a lot of the time we don't even know we're making any assumptions.

Intellectually, I find it helpful to know this stuff, but it's never really cut it as far as any sense of freedom. It's taken this continual looking, looking, looking, until suddenly we see: oh, things aren't the way I thought they were at all.

This is from Oliver Sacks, the neurologist. He's writing about a man who was in his fifties and had been blind since he was about five, and had adapted quite well to his life.

He lived by himself, was engaged to be married, worked as a masseur, and was quite at ease getting through the world. His mode of putting the world together was through touch, of course, and he was quite competent and at ease in that mode.

When he was about fifty, doctors found that they actually could do an operation that would give him some sight. His family, his fiancée, everyone was all excited about this. They did the operation on one eye, and everyone stood around waiting for the great unveiling when they took off the patch, just so excited about

how happy he was going to be to be able to see.

This is Oliver Sacks: "Virgil told me later that he had no idea what he was seeing. There was light, there was movement, there was color, all mixed up, all meaningless, a blur. Then out of that blur came a voice that said, 'Well?' Then, and only then, he said, did he finally realize that this blur, this chaos of light and shadow, must be a face—the face of his surgeon."

He only realized that because he knew that voices come out of faces. So that must be a face, but it didn't coalesce into any sense.

Oliver Sacks goes on: "For those of us who are born with sight, we can scarcely imagine his confusion, because we who are born with a full complement of all the senses and correlate these together constantly, we create a sighted world from the start—a world of visual objects and concepts and meanings. When we open our eyes each morning, it's upon a world we have spent a lifetime learning to see. We are not given the world of sighted objects. We make our world through incessant experience, memory, and reconnection. But when Virgil opened his eye after being blind for forty-five years, there were no visual memories to support a perception. There was no world of experience and meaning awaiting him. He saw, but what he saw had no coherence."

His nerves were working, his eyes were working, but his brain could make no sense of the visual input. As Sacks continued following Virgil, it got a little better, but not much. In fact, his life was actually much more difficult for him after he got some sight back. It would be so exhausting trying to make sense of the world through sight that he would often just close his eyes and go back to eating with his fingers or shaving in the dark, because he never really could make a lot of meaning out of the world of sight.

I love that example because it helps me break down this sense of how assumptions I make—that things are the way they appear to be—operate without my even realizing I'm making that assumption. We take these perceptions for granted until something gets us to really look.

Nisargadatta Maharaj says, "We don't wake up because we have not really understood that we're dreaming, and we are renewing the dream from moment to moment."

So our practice, the practice of mindfulness, is to get us—as Thich Nhat Hanh often says—to look deeply. To look past assumptions, to even look past what we think the recognized perception is, and just meet the bare experience: the sight, the sound, the thought, the sensation, the smell, whatever it might be.

When we can look deeply without believing all the thoughts and conclusions and assumptions that seem to make reality so solid, when we can just keep meeting experience, then some of these assumptions about how things are, about how we think we're perceiving our experience, begin to break down. And that's what's happening in its own way for each person here, whether you believe it or not.

Sometimes it's dramatic. I know different people have brought up this sense of, "Well, if the sense of

impermanence is supposed to be this arising and passing of elements—sensations just coming and going..." I get from a lot of people a sense that this is what we're supposed to experience to really know impermanence. And it's true—it's one experience that does bring in more of a sense of impermanence, because you really see that there's no solid connection.

But it also happens in other ways. It happens in seeing the impermanent, ephemeral nature of emotions, of the sense of self. It happens when we see that we're sitting in what feels like "my knee is killing me," and when we really let go of that idea and just note the arising appearances. There's sensation, there's unpleasant, there's a thought "my knee," and actually there's no sense of where knee actually is. Then there's an image of me with my knee in it that arises, and then, "Oh yeah, my knee." This coming and going of different sense experiences that, without examination, we put together into one gestalt: "This is my knee and it's killing me."

And there are many other ways. Look for yourself. With any of the sense experiences, notice how our assumptions begin to break down. Sometimes it's exhilarating. Sometimes it's really scary. Sometimes it's very disorienting. A lot of the times when you feel like you're breaking into new ground, so to speak, this is what's going on. In some way, an unquestioned assumption is being challenged, and we don't have a new one yet to put in its place to make us feel comfortable.

Our sense of self-image, especially when we're suffering from it, arises in very much the same way. We isolate a particular perception—whether it's a thought or a felt sense, or we look at ourselves in the mirror, whatever it is—we isolate that particular perception, all the thoughts and conclusions that come out of it, then we dwell on it, ignore any perception to the contrary, and it seems really true. That's when thought is a burden. That's when we're really enslaved by thought.

So notice when we're doing this. For example, some people will often say, "My concentration is no good, I can't stay on the breath." That's a particular experience, a perception, a conclusion. Any other perceptions that would challenge it are not noticed, and this self-image of "my practice stinks, I can't concentrate" is carried around, and there's a lot of suffering from it.

Quite often when we talk about it, what emerges is that you can't stay on the breath because so many different experiences are coming and going that actually impermanence is just streaming as experience. But we're trying to make it permanent and stay on the breath, and you just can't do it.

You can't actually fight the fact of impermanence happening. So it's simply a matter of switching the perception. "Oh, in fact, my practice is really good—I'm seeing impermanence!" And then that changes too, and we keep looking for impermanence instead of recognizing, "Well, things are quiet now. Just stay on the breath."

This same dynamic plays out in the whole perception of who we are in our lives. "I'm such a negative, aversive person." You might have ten, twenty, thirty thoughts that are kind, that are generous. You might

have all these really loving impulses. And then one selfish, aversive thought comes up—and that's the one we notice. The rest are ignored, totally not identified with. They have no reality. But this one negative, aversive thought? This is true. Our self-image becomes wrapped around it, and there's no balance of perception.

This is one of the ways we become enslaved by the content of thought—by picking out a particular perception, ignoring all the others, and then dwelling on it. The perception itself might even be somewhat accurate, such as "that was an aversive thought." But it's just a thought, and we don't recognize the extra identification with it, the way the mind perceives it, takes it, and runs.

So this is the next aspect of thought I want to explore: starting from the mistaken perception and believing it, dwelling on the conclusion—which is powerful enough on its own. As Nisargadatta says, "The world appears to you so overwhelmingly real because you think about it all the time. If you stop thinking of it so much, it will dissolve into thin mist."

It's not the thoughts themselves. They can come and go. They dissolve into thin mist all by themselves. It's this holding on to the conclusions and then building on that with a sense of self that makes the world so real. So there's an inaccurate perception, a description of it, a conclusion fueled by the mental state—greed, hatred, or delusion coloring consciousness in that moment. And then there's this quality we call proliferation, where the mind just takes that perception and runs with it, far and fast, like the way my mind could go from "boom" to a war in Vancouver to turning on the radio in ten seconds.

This process, as you know, is called *papañca*—one of my favorite Pali words. I just love the way it sounds. *Papañca.* It's defined or described as not the misperception itself, but there's a perception, and then, the texts say, "what one perceives, one thinks about." It's just natural that thoughts arise accompanying experience—"this is the bell, that means it's the end of the sitting," or "does that mean it's lunchtime?" Those in themselves are not a problem, just thoughts arising, then associations.

But out of this, proliferation is manufactured when there is in the mind one or several of the disturbing mental factors—which I'll discuss in a moment. There's the perception, there's association, some stray thoughts, and all of a sudden this energy of craving, of comparing, of a sense of self comes up, and whoosh—it's turned into what the texts call "notions that assail and overwhelm a person." We're just beaten back, it feels like, by the power of this proliferating mind. Or it's called "the tendency of imagination to break loose and run riot." These descriptions are from the old commentaries.

And I would say it isn't even so much that the mind runs riot—the problem is that we believe it. The mind is breaking loose and running riot, and we're sitting there going, "Yeah, that's really the way it is." And then we are so far from being in touch with reality that we don't even know it. That's how suffering really happens. Boom, and we're at war.

Or here in retreat, as some people describe it: you're just sitting there minding your own business,

somebody walks by, and so fast come all our associations with them, with ourselves, what we think of them, what we think of ourselves. Maybe we've never spoken to this person, but we really know what their past was like, what their personality is like, what their practice is like, what's going to happen to them in the future. As someone said to me the other day, "We really know it." We really think we know it. Things feel solid.

And what really happened in that moment? Very little. There was seeing. There was pleasant or unpleasant. And there were some thoughts. That was it. But out of that, so quickly, a whole solid reality arises. This is the process of proliferation. Seeing it is enough to cut the power of believing it.

It's fueled by—in the classic commentaries, they talk about three mental factors that tend to really fuel this proliferation. I just want to give examples of these, though I think there are really more, and you'll recognize them for yourself. I love seeing this process happening. It's not like we have to hate it. Once you see it happening, it just becomes really funny to observe how we are living in this totally mind-created world most of the time. It's much simpler than we actually think it is.

The first fuel is wrong view—the basic sense of self. This is obvious, because most of our suffering and misperceptions and identification is fueled by this. I'll just give one example, since it's always at the bottom of everything. One of my teachers said, "When the 'I' thought arises, in the twinkling of an eye, whole universes are created." This is really true. You could just be seeing, but as soon as there's "I'm seeing that," in a minute whole universes arise.

Here's an example of how just the subtle sense of "I" can lead into a whole papañca, even without any big story. This winter when I was sitting, I remember doing walking meditation, pretty focused. I just stopped and looked out the window when I got to the end of my line, and it was snowing—as it seemed to always be snowing. It was very present, but there was just this subtle sense of "I." I guess I wasn't even aware of it, but there was seeing, perception of snow. And then with that little sense of self came memory of snow in the past and how I felt about snow, the different times there had been snow in my childhood, and projecting snow into the future. Each thought itself was pretty light—there wasn't a lot of craving or aversion—but there was that subtle sense of self. And it went into this whole papañca about snow, basically about me, just from that seeing, just from that simple sense contact. It's not a huge experience of suffering or anything, but it's definitely getting involved in story that isn't happening at all. There's just seeing and thinking happening.

The second energy that really fuels this proliferation is—big surprise—craving. This can also be really fun to watch, because of how it works. There's a saying that craving puts feathers on the object that's craved. The craving actually invests the thing that the mind is craving with desirability, with a sense of pleasurableness that might not actually be there in the particular experience at all. And then we just get lost in a whole proliferation of thought about it.

For example, again while I was sitting last year, this thought kept coming into my mind—an image of a

street corner in Bangkok that, for some reason, every time it arose, the mind was colored with craving. I would go into this whole yearning for this street corner in Bangalampu that has absolutely nothing attractive about it. I don't care if I never see it again in my life. I have no idea what would seem so pleasant about it. So I could really see the process of how the craving feeds papañca in this moment. The image would come up and it would look so pleasant, so attractive. This yearning would come—I was in South Africa at the time—and I'd think, maybe I can change my flight and go back to Bangkok. I'd get into a whole thing about how I was going to call the travel agent, and this would go on for five minutes. Then suddenly: wait a minute, I never want to go back to Bangalampu, I don't want to change my flight. And it would stop. But it kept happening over and over and over. It was really a perfect example of how it's the craving itself that gives the sense of attractiveness to the particular object. And if it's strong enough, it could have led me to change my plans, to actually try to go back there.

Papañca doesn't just have to mean thoughts, you know. If it gets strong enough, it can lead us into all kinds of action. Those times when you're sitting in your room and suddenly you have to leap up and run out the door—to look in case you got that note you've been waiting for, or check the mail, whatever it is—the craving got so strong that it leads to action.

I was walking again this winter, and it was so strong. About half an hour previously, I'd been in one of those spaces where I just want to be on retreat forever—it's so wonderful, this is really it, you think you'll give up your life and stay on retreat. And I was walking, and a thought of my parents came up, a very loving thought, like an image of them, and a sense of wanting to see them. It got so strong so quickly that I was about to stop walking and go to the phone and make a reservation. It was really strong, so strong that it brought me up short. The only thing that stopped me was remembering that half an hour previously I had been so into the retreat that I never wanted to stop. So I thought, maybe this will pass too. But that's the strength of it.

of the proliferation of mind when we don't see it. The thoughts become a totally solid world.

So this is a really important thing if we can remember it: just because a thought arises together with a strong emotion, it doesn't make it true. And the stronger the emotion doesn't make it more true. Really, they have very little correlation—whether something is true or accurate and how strong the emotion is. I found that really helpful, if I can remember it.

The third mental factor that feeds proliferation—and this is very strong and also very subtle—is what is called *mana* in Pali, translated usually as conceit. I was just flipping through the references to it in the Majjhima Nikaya, and usually when it's referred to there, it's referred to as "the conceit I am"—that really subtle underlying flavor almost, or scent you could say, of a sense of self. That's the very subtle part.

But there's another aspect that is not so subtle, that most of us experience really a lot. And that's the mind of comparing—the sense, actually it feels constant sometimes, of comparing every body or every experience to something else. Either it's better than I am, or it's worse than I am, or we're the same. This

mental quality of comparing is one of the strongest impulses for a huge amount of proliferation and an equally huge amount of suffering.

I don't know if you've noticed how unpleasant the sense of comparing can be, but it's helpful to really notice it and notice what's actually happening.

We can compare with others. That's obvious. Just that sense of walking and somebody walks past, and the comparing mind cannot let that happen without making a comparison. Better, worse, faster, slower, about the same. And of course it's endless, because we have to figure out comparing ourselves with every other person here. And since everyone changes from day to day, then we have to do it every day. We have to constantly reassess where we are on the scale of comparing. I mean, if you're really bored, okay, it's something to do—it'll keep your mind busy. But it's a lot of suffering. To just be, without seeing, is a lot easier.

We can also compare to the past, either to our own past experience, to memories. I remember, again, I was walking—I seem to notice a lot of this stuff when I'm walking—and was just aware of tightness. And then a memory arose of a walking period on another retreat, and it wasn't tight. That was all. That could have been all. Except then the mind says, "Yeah, it's really tight now. That other time was better. In fact, your practice stinks. How come you're so tight?" And then into the whole "I'm no good."

And in fact, if you notice, the whole sense of worthlessness, unworthiness, all the judgment—comparing is a really rife pool, you know, to breed the sense of unworthiness, the sense of worthlessness. Or if it happens to come up by itself, comparing is a really good way to strengthen it and keep it going. So to notice comparing is really, really helpful.

We can also compare to some image or ideal we have of how things should be—to something you heard in the instructions, to something you read, to something you didn't even read but you think maybe you read, but that's how the practice is supposed to be. Whatever it is, comparing is of course very subtle at times, but it's a really strong way to solidify the sense of self.

One teacher I was reading said that comparing arises when the mind fixates on differences. She was asked a question: "Why do people take this apparent world to be so real?" And the answer was: because they concentrate, they really focus on things, on specific things, and see differences, see diversity rather than unity.

It's not to say that seeing things necessarily means a sense of separation. But there is a way in comparing where we're really focused on this as compared to me. We're really seeing differences. And in that, there can only be a stronger sense of self and a stronger sense of separation.

But I noticed once, and I don't know if this will make sense—I really liked it. It was like a little insight that even when the mind is caught in delusion, there's a way that the ultimate truths show themselves.

I was noticing when I was in a really strong comparing mode, where if anyone would walk out of a door, there would be some judgment. They walk too close—they have no respect. They walk too fast—don't they know what's going on here? They walk too slow—they have no clear comprehension. Whatever it was, I suddenly realized it was totally self-centered. There's this sense of an unchanging reference point.

But the fact of total interdependence was really clear, because anything anybody did completely affected me. There was actually no way that anything could happen anywhere within my sense perception that I didn't feel a relatedness to it. It was just deluded, because all the relatedness was: how does it affect me, solid little me. But still, hidden under it was the sense of the interconnectedness of it all.

So somehow that quite amused me. And it also, in a strange way—this is sometimes how my mind has to find hope—that even when I'm totally caught in comparing and self, there can be a way to see through it to the fact that yes, we are all interconnected. I just have to see that I'm not the center of it all.

Looking at impermanence, awareness of impermanence, is what breaks down the comparing mind. On a logical level this makes sense, because in one way you see there's nothing solid to compare to. Either on the end of who's the better yogi—well, it's constantly changing. As I said before, there's no solid reference point externally, so to speak; it's always changing. And internally, there's no solid reference point to come back to for myself either.

Because just something as simple as: do I walk fast or slow? Some days fast, some days slow. Is my practice the way I like it? Some days yes, some days no. Some days it's the same, but the way I like it changed. So there is no really solid reference point. And the more we see that, any sense of comparing—there is no sense in it. So it starts to fall away.

Another thing that's helped me when I notice the comparing mind is strong: the most helpful approach is just to notice "comparing" and see if you can see what's actually happening. Often it's triggered by seeing. So a good practice at times when you feel pretty trapped in it is to deliberately just notice seeing, especially walking around, around other people.

For me, the dining room practice is really a great place to play with seeing how the comparing mind functions, and also to notice the peace on the odd moment when it's not there. It's like, oh, there's just what is. I don't have to do this relentless counting up and comparing—just tasting a bite.

I've found when the comparing is strong and when there's walking into the dining room with a really solid sense of me, kind of being barraged by all the activity and this constant measuring of this against me, this against me—that if I turn into a really open kind of practice, where instead of being so involved in my sensations or really careful with lifting, moving, placing, I actually open up and start being very present with hearing, with seeing... If I do that for some moments, sometimes the sense of solid Carol, or even a reference back to Carol, goes away, and there's just seeing and hearing. If there's a loud noise, there's just hearing, just sensation. And quite by itself, the reference point of me and them—who's that jerk who

dropped the plate? Don't they know how to be mindful?—falls away. There's just seeing, hearing, sensing, emotion. And it all gets a lot lighter. The sense of separation tends to go away. So that's just something you might play with if you're noticing dining room practice is getting difficult.

All of these aspects that drive papañca tend to feed into strong storylines which contribute to maintaining our false assumption of self, the false assumption of me. One of the ways we can begin to notice that the sense of a continuing me is created is actually through our thoughts—this running commentary that you might have going all day. Or not even the running commentary, but the way we take perceptions, make a conclusion, and then tell ourselves stories, describe ourselves, describe our experiences, make comparisons, all day long. Unless we really look, it can feel as though it's the same me. The same me is telling this story as was telling the one yesterday. But if you really look, they're completely different experiences.

So we can begin to see how a sense perception, whether it's accurate or not, can lead into a whole proliferation based on craving or sense of self or conceit or comparing—that we end up becoming. This whole process of moving from bare perception to becoming this quickly is really quite often at the basis of our sense of self. It's one of the ways thoughts seem so solid, one of the ways that thoughts can really be a strong suffering aspect of experience, where we can feel really enslaved—unless we look. And in the looking, that solidity just vanishes, and a thought just becomes a thought.

A simple example: when you're walking or sitting and you're really present, it's pretty common for, at some point, the thought to arise, "This is it, now I've got it," or "I'm doing well, mindfulness is strong, I'm a good yogi"—whatever the story is. And as the papañca runs, and it doesn't have to be strong, we pick out all the perceptions that affirm that, all the past wonderful things we did in our life, all the times we were successful, all the times people liked us. We imagine into the future how we're going to inspire, how our friends are going to be awestruck when we return home in a radiant halo glow. They'll just say, "Oh my God, what happened to you? It's amazing."

And then, of course, we catch this. And the next thought is, "Oh my God, what an idiot I am. So self-centered." And then just the reverse—everything we ever did wrong, everything we started and never finished, all the ways we've never been able to function in any kind of clear way, and on into the future where we come home and our friends say, "You went for three months and you're worse of a mess than when you left." It's possible.

And we get involved in each of those, and we don't stop to look—it's just thoughts. Joseph has this saying I really love: "We're making it all up." And it's absolutely true. We're completely making it up.

You know that pretty well-known sutta where the Buddha is talking to a man who has very urgently said, "You've got to teach me right now, I have no time." The Buddha was on his way to alms round and he didn't want to. He said, "I'll do it when I come back." And the man asked three times, so he gave him this very pithy teaching which says: In the seen there is only the seen. In the heard there is only the heard. In

what is sensed, felt with the body, there is only that. In what is cognized, known with the mind, there is only what is cognized. That's all.

It's very pithy. Can you imagine actually living like that? Everything else is interpretation. It's helpful that we often have the same interpretation, because then we can sort of function together—the interpretation of what a retreat means. It's helpful we all more or less agree on that. And who's in which role, that we come in here and we know who's supposed to talk and who's supposed to listen, or it could be really confusing. And we know that's only for this moment. If I thought I'm supposed to talk, that's my role all the time, I have to talk every minute, be giving dharma talks—I'd be insufferable.

So it's helpful interpretation, but what our practice is doing is helping us come back to absolutely the bare experience, seeing that we're making everything else up. This can be scary, but it's incredibly liberating. Experiment with it.

One time I was sitting in my room, and I heard crickets outside. Usually, and it did then, this brings up a whole welling of nostalgia and poignancy—fall and endings of things and sadness and loneliness, the feeling of "I could die here and no one would know for three days." It was really going down that road. And I said, okay. I'm making it all up. A thought is a thought. Let me deliberately shift it.

So I went back to hearing, hearing the crickets. And I thought, "Oh, isn't that lovely? The sound of the crickets, to be here in this beautiful spot in nature." And that felt forced, okay? I was doing that on purpose. But that's as far as I did on purpose.

And then the whole papañca just took off. "Isn't it wonderful? Life is so great! Here I am at this retreat center, and I have the opportunity to sit with all these other wonderful people." And it was just as real as the one before—which is to say, neither of them was real. It was just the mind making up that particular story, that particular sense of self.

Lily Tomlin said, "I always wanted to be somebody, but I should have been more specific."

So that's our job. Let's be a little more specific. Let's just notice what's really happening as opposed to what we think is happening. And then, if we know it's thoughts, it's nothing to be afraid of. It doesn't have to be an enslavement. When we understand that a thought is a thought, it's so liberating to have the sense that it's okay if thoughts come. It's okay if they have a little zing to them. But then we can just bring our attention back: a thought is just a thought. In what is cognized, there is only what is cognized.

Thich Nhat Hanh says, "To have a correct perception, we need to have a direct encounter."

So that's our practice—the wise attention. Moment by moment, let's have a direct encounter, either with the perception that's giving rise to the thought, or if that's already gone or you can't notice it, with the thought itself, just the quality of thought arising. Its ephemeral nature. Notice the space around it, the space between thoughts, just so it doesn't have such a sense of solidity. Don't try to fight thoughts with

thought. It's like a ghost fighting a ghost. You don't need to fight the mind with the mind. All we need is to bring attention onto the thought itself.

I just want to end with this from Huang Po. He says that we tend to be blinded by our sight, our hearing, our feeling and knowing, and the conceptual thinking arising from it. When we're blinded by this thinking, we don't perceive the radiance of the source. But when we're not deluded—when there's just the sight, hearing, feeling, and knowing, when we're not blinded by all the conceptual thinking—this source will appear like the sun rising through the empty sky and illuminating the whole universe.

Thank you for listening.

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