Formation of Self-View

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:11:05

So to begin this morning's session, I'd like to ask about your experience in the meditation we just had. We were looking at disturbances that come into our experience in meditation. What are they about? What are the different things that can upset the mind? And how does that feel in the body when the mind gets upset about something?

A couple people be willing to share anything you noticed.

"I notice that the ease comes with this sense of extension into space. And it's so delicious to rest there. Then to turn into the body, to notice the effect on the body of something—one of those thoughts that you don't know where they come from started. There was something about Harry Potter. So then my mind went, 'Harry Potter, for God's...' And as soon as that complaint or exasperation came, I understand now why we use the word 'upset' because it seemed to lift up and overturn this wonderful, easy, out there, in there. But mostly, and then with the non-deva realm experience, after quiet came, it was very interesting to observe how that right ear—for me the right ear—was still hypervigilant, kind of had that energy of checking, checking, and to feel how that settles the mind-body process. It felt like, well, I hate to say these things, it just felt like my body were not too... that there was again just an ease when the other thoughts did flow through. It was just continually surprising to me how it's all about me. It's just so much self."

Good. Thank you. So noticing that a thought brought a sense of exasperation—why that thought?—a sense of upset from the energy coming up, and then a way to settle back into that vast peace and ease, and a comment that many thoughts that came were all about me.

Anybody else? We'll take just one or two.

"Fatigue and then this thing which always happens and gets more and more over long retreats of this something comes up that causes this physical jerking. And I know over long ones I've practically gotten epileptic, so still not sure what that's all about."

Thank you. So sometimes it's a movement in the body that comes and seems to disrupt the sense of peace.

"Mine was like the first speaker where there's this real expansion and it feels like it can hold—it feels like it's kind of floating—it can hold any pain, any of the big hurts. There's room. And then when a thought comes, there's a real tightness, and it goes to the small me. So I'm straightaway relating it to me. And then the other thing I noticed was there's an ache in my gut, which I really confuse with hunger. So there's this real sense, oh, I could eat, and that would rest it. And then I could physically make the expansion happen again and hold it. So it was a really interesting thing to see that I could do that."

Lovely, thank you. So feeling the expansiveness, the peace of that, the contraction into the small me, and then with breathing being able to let go of that constriction, tightness again.

Okay, thank you all. We'll come back to this later in our discussion this morning, but I just wanted to pull out some of the common themes that sometimes we can hold those waves that come through us in the space or in the peace. Sometimes we can't. They're disturbing, they're upsetting, and in that there's a sense of contraction, a tightening, a narrowing, a focus. That's what the disturbance tends to bring, often connected with "I," and then that can be relaxed, expanded again, and retouch the peace and ease.

Good. Thank you.

So that's a good introduction to what I'd like to talk about this morning. The topic is the formation of self-view. And on the study guide, we're up to page five now. This, of course, is not a simple thing. How the self comes to appear seems to exist. It's not trivial. It's considered one of the roots of our bondage, as Sally talked about last night with the three characteristics. I would even go so far as to say it has kind of cosmic implications.

I don't want to sound too pretentious here, but when you think about this process of coming into human existence, there's a deep mystery to it that we tend not to reflect on in our day-to-day lives. But how is it that this quality of consciousness got joined with this element of matter that is our body so that the body can be in the world and yet pick up the sights and sounds and smells and tastes and sensations of that world and then re-display the world through our sense phenomena, through our sense creations, really? As the Buddha said, within this fathom-long body is contained the world, its origin, its end. How is that possible? It's really a mystery that no one has explained.

I like to think of it along the lines, just to kind of set the perspective for what we're working with, of different creation stories or creation myths about how this all came to be. Of course, the theistic version is very common in our culture. A god was there from the beginning and created all the rest of this. And who knows how it works, but God knows, so that's all we need to worry about. It's never quite explained how God came to be there, but we don't worry about that part. So that's one approach to the creation story.

The predominant creation story in our day and age is the scientific one, which is a materialist explanation that at one moment there was nothing, and then there was the Big Bang. And through the Big Bang, the universe exploded incredibly fast into forms of matter, probably just protons and electrons at that point. And over time, that material substance collected, formed stars. Through the explosion of stars, that debris created planets. Through the enduring of planets over the ages, water collected, and with heat and some form of electricity, maybe lightning bolts, in this cosmic setting, some life started to appear in that water just through chemical reactions, blind chemical reactions of nucleic acids.

And those one-celled organisms which first appeared on this planet over three billion years ago, according to geologists and biologists, grew up and became you and me. That's basically the story of Western science.

How did consciousness come in? Where did consciousness come from? For me, there's something that doesn't quite make sense—that consciousness could come out of dumb matter.

So for people like me, there's an alternate creation myth. And this we might call the mentalist creation myth. And in this creation myth, mind was first. Not matter. Mind was first. And there's the sense—I'm not telling this from any particular text, but it's suggested by a few texts—that in the beginning there were no objects. There was no matter. But there was something that could be called a kind of primordial sense of luminosity or a primordial potential for awareness. And that's all there was.

This was a non-dual state. Because it's all there was, there was nothing that could be known by it. But you might say it knew itself. So because there was no other, there was only peace and bliss, immovability and non-duality. Then something stirred. Something stirred within this vastness of mind, something stirred that was a reaching for something different or something other. And then it's said that fragments of this luminosity or consciousness separated, lost the understanding of their source and went looking for matter, and ended up finding or creating—the story isn't quite clear—bodies and the world. The consciousness inhabited the body and then was able to look out and have contact through the senses of the body.

This is an alternate creation myth. So which way do you lean? Do you lean to a scientific materialist view? Do you lean to, let's say, a philosophical idealist view based on mind? I don't know. Both of them have their merits and neither one fully explains the situation that we're in. One explains the fact of physicality, the other explains the presence of consciousness or mind, but I regard them both just as stories, or if you like, myths, if they have that quality for you. But reflecting in this way kind of opens us up to the mystery of how this all got started and how we originated, where we came from.

So, what did the Buddha say about this? The Buddha said, don't think about it. He said the beginning of things is one of the four imponderables, along with the range of mind of a Buddha, the power of a concentrated mind, and the specific workings of karma. And he said that anyone who dwells on this and tries to figure it out will experience vexation and go mad. So maybe we should send a letter to the cosmologists and let them know.

About where we are now, the Buddha said that matter and consciousness lean on each other like two stocks of reeds that have been tied up and are leaning and supporting each other. If you take one away, the other collapses also. So if you take consciousness away from this system, the life force of the body will collapse.

If you take the life force of the body away, consciousness will collapse. So in the Buddha's view, it's kind of a middle way between these two ideas, and both are dependent upon one another.

But at any rate, somehow out of this mystery of beginnings, we have accumulated into these bodies. And we find ourselves born and sort of wondering, what's this all about? Rumi put it very well. He said,

"Where did I come from and what am I doing here? I have no idea." That's kind of our situation when we start to wake up. We don't know where we came from and we don't know what we're supposed to do. But here we are in this human setting.

So our human setting is described by the Buddha in the quote at the top of page five. It says, "Monks, what is the totality of life? Listen, attend carefully, and I will teach you the totality of life. It is simply the eye and sight, the ear and sounds, the nose and smells, the tongue and taste, the body and sensations, the mind and mind objects. Anyone who said they were going to describe anything beyond this as the totality of life would not be speaking of something they knew about."

So this is our situation. Somehow consciousness and form have become married, and the result is that we have contact through the six senses: sight, sound, smell, taste, touch. Mind objects refers primarily to thoughts and emotions. Can also include meditative states such as concentration, equanimity, feeling, perception. Basically thoughts and emotions.

So whatever it is that has urged us into this field of contact, this is our situation, and it's really what we're here for. I was on my first three-month course a long time ago, and one of my fellow meditators asked Joseph Goldstein, who was one of the teachers. She came up to him outside a formal session in the hall, grabbed him in a hallway one time and said with great urgency, "Joseph, why are we here?" And Joseph said, "Do you mean here on this retreat or here at all?" And she said, "I mean here at all. Why are we here?" And Joseph said, "Well, it's because you wanted to see and hear and taste and touch and smell."

That is kind of the Buddhist understanding. It's out of this longing for sense contact, for something different, for differentiation, that we have taken birth. Some kind of urge for those experiences. Nisargadatta Maharaj puts it this way: "Desire for embodied existence is the root cause of trouble."

It is, isn't it? Because as soon as we open ourselves up to this wide-ranging sense contact, as Sally talked about last night, we find that it's out of our control. We can't control sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, or mind objects. So we're bombarded. This is what it means to be a sentient being, to be a human being. We're bombarded by a mix of pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral experiences at the six sense doors, and it happens all the time. All the time we're awake, at least.

Can you turn that off? Not possible. That's asking, can I go unconscious? Not possible in our normal waking hours to turn that off. And it's this constant bombardment of pleasant, unpleasant, neutral experiences that forms the ground for our reactive mind. It really forms the ground for self. So we sort of distinguish ourselves apart from what we see and sense and hear and feel. So that gives us a sense of difference, a sense of separation. This body is separate from other bodies.

And this sense of separation gives the being, gives the human being a sense of isolation. Scientific researchers have started to investigate this quality of isolation and found that it's one of the most painful things about being a human. And the more isolated one gets, the more direct pain is experienced as a

result of it. Also, being in a body, we sort of become the custodian of it. We're the guardian of it.

We have to take care of it. And this can be a burden, too. We have to protect it, defend it, nourish it, feed it, keep it safe, and so on. So all of this is the burden of the aggregates.

We have this body. It exposes us to great potential for pain and suffering. And there's a sense of fear. Almost every human being, unless deeply trained, has a fear of dying, fear of death, a fear of this experience coming to an end. This is all part of the consequence of this embodied existence.

So finding ourselves in this situation, we make a project. And this is the central work of the self. The project is: keep only pleasant experiences coming and keep painful experiences away. That's our basic strategy.

If you look at how it's expressed from children, from an early age, as it continues through adolescence into adulthood, this is what we orient our life's activity around—keeping the pleasant coming as steadily as possible. Permanent would be good. Permanent pleasantness would be a good solution. But again, as Sally said, because of the truth of impermanence, that's not possible to arrange.

Or at the very least, if we can't have permanent pleasantness, let's have permanent absence of unpleasantness. So anything that comes into the field of experience that's of a painful nature, we want to push away.

This sets up the basic work of desire on the one hand and aversion on the other. And as you investigate the mental reactivity that comes in the middle of peaceful periods, this is what the reactivity is about—pulling toward us what's pleasant, pushing away what's unpleasant. These are the reactive movements of greed and aversion.

They're also accompanied by the third of the kilesas, the third of the tainted mental states, which is delusion, because we fail to see that that's what's happening. As we grow up, we think this is just a normal, natural, unavoidable way to relate to life. It's only when we come to meditation and turn our mindfulness to the activity that we start to realize—maybe it helps us get a little more pleasure, maybe it helps us keep away a little of the unpleasant, but we are paying a huge price.

And the price is constant activity, constant turmoil, constant effort to control the environment, to control the inner experience so that it's only pleasant and never painful. This is the project of the self. This is how we try to take care of our needs.

And these forces spring into the mind again and again and again—desire, aversion, and the delusion of not understanding. These forces combined are called craving by the Buddha. He summed these up as the force of craving: greed, aversion, and delusion.

This is a quotation from the Buddha: "Obstructed by ignorance and fettered by craving, beings have been wandering in this samsara since beginningless time."

So from the Buddha's point of view, this is not a momentary dilemma, a temporary dilemma, or a trivial dilemma. This is our inheritance as sentient beings. These twin forces of ignorance and craving are what propelled us into this embodied existence. And until we can resolve them, we are at the mercy of them.

So this is usually our situation as we meet meditation or spiritual practice, spiritual life of some sort. We start to feel the impact or the burden of this heritage. We start to feel the suffering that's involved in the turmoil of this approach to life. And we look for a resolution, a solution.

This is again from Nisargadatta Maharaj: "All yogas have only one aim: to save you from the calamity of separate existence." This believing ourselves to be separate is a calamity. This is the view that's responsible for all the struggle and turmoil. And we search for a way out of this extremely difficult and hard to resolve situation.

The suggestion, as Sally pointed to last night, is that this sense of separation is to some extent an illusion. Yes, the bodies are separate, but in many ways not much else is. Our beings interpenetrate one another. That's what sangha is for. You're part of my experience in this moment, and I'm part of your experience. Because of our ability to feel into each other's states of heart and mind, we share our beings with one another.

As we grow together in a sangha, we share our spiritual strengths with one another—our patience, our persistence, our loving kindness, our wisdom, our compassion. All of these are shared and felt within the community of sangha. So we're not entirely separate, but it looks like we are, and in the beginning we think we are because of this fixation on the view of self.

So one of the central inquiries in Dharma practice is to look into the sense of self—how it's created, in what ways it may be real, and in what ways it may be unreal.

The first thing we notice is that when we try to find it within our actual experience, it's not really findable. All we can find when we look are sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, thoughts and emotions, and mind. Mind in this context is consciousness, or what's doing the looking. So there are the experiences of the six senses and the knowing of them, the consciousness. That's it. There's no thing, no central entity that is the center of all that or experiencing all that.

William James said, "When I go to look for myself, all I can find is a tickling at the back of my throat." It's very elusive when we sit down and look. And the Dalai Lama said, "When something seems obvious, but you can't actually find it, it means that there's some delusion present."

So we are deluded about this thing we call I, which is the central feature of our existence. Almost everything we do and think about and care about has something to do with this I. And yet, we're deluded about it. So this suggests the first thing we should do in going to some depth in our Dharma practice is try to clarify this question: What is this thing we call I?

The confusion is revealed in our ordinary language. If I ask you, "How old are you?" it's not a hard question to answer. I would say, "I'm 62." But when I say I'm 62, what I really mean is this body is 62. My thoughts aren't 62—I just had some of these thoughts this morning for the first time. The thoughts aren't 62. My feelings aren't 62. They're being born right now and they're very much like a child's feelings in many ways. But the body is 62 years old. So when we say, "I'm 62," we're identifying I am the body.

But I could also ask you, "What color are your eyes?" And I would reply, "My eyes are brown." But this is a different relationship. Last time I was the body; now I'm somebody that owns eyes. These are my eyes. So now I become the owner of the body. So which are you? Are you the body or are you its owner? You can't really be both, can you? Or how many selves do you have?

We could also talk about it in relation to emotions. Somebody might ask you, "How are you today?" And you'd say, "I'm very happy, thank you," or "I'm sad today." So here, the I is the emotion—happiness, sadness, loneliness, fear, joy. But we could also talk about my joys, my sorrows, my happiness, my grief. And here the I becomes the owner of the emotions. So which is it? Are we the emotion or are we the owner of it?

So these are four different ways that the I manifests in our language, in our speech. And we tend to believe them all. That's what's so interesting. We don't normally see any contradiction in believing all of these.

And another central way that the I manifests, that we feel it, is that the I is located just behind the eyes, somewhere in the center of the head, maybe in the region of the brain, and it's what looks out on the world all the time as observer. And this is maybe one of the more deeply felt senses of I—the hidden observer.

One of the things I really enjoyed about doing practice in the style of U Ba Khin or S.N. Goenka was moving my attention through the whole physical body. Every piece being explored as fully as possible with really precise, minute, attentive mindfulness. I explored this area all over my head and inside my head and the feelings between my ears. I couldn't ever find that observer. Couldn't locate it.

Even modern brain research done through fMRIs that I'm sure you've read about also finds there's no central organizer within the workings of the brain. Many different independent activities are happening. There's no controller within the brain itself.

So here are five ways we might think of the "I." And this last one I would say is an identification with knowing, maybe an identification with seeing, because it's often connected with the eyes. And there's also no ground for that one. But it is interesting that we tend to attach the "I" to all these different kinds of experiences.

Let's take a look at quotation number 20, also on page 5. "Venerable Sir, how does personality view come to be?"

This term "personality view" is quite an interesting one. The Pali is *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*. It's the sense that one is a person or personality, and it's holding this view. Every time we express a word like "I'm 62..." and we haven't, let's say, seen through this false identification with the self as body, we're expressing a view about our personhood. Our person is 62 years old.

So this personality view could also be described as a self view or the activity of forming a self. Really what the person is asking is, how does a sense of self come to be formed?

And so this is the Buddha's answer: "Here, bhikkhu, an untaught ordinary person regards material form as self." Material form is all the matter in the world. It includes the body, but it's not limited to the body. It's also outside matter. But here, it might be useful to think of it for illustration as body and see how this works.

"Regards material form as self, or self as possessed of material form, or material form as in self, or self as in material form." And then he goes through the other five aggregates in the same way. "That is how personality view comes to be."

So let's just look at some of these. "The untaught ordinary person regards material form as self." Do we ever take the body to be self? Yes. "Or self is possessed of material form." Do we ever think this body is mine? "The eyes are..." "These are my eyes." "This is my health." "Or material form as in self." This is kind of an unusual one. When you think about the body, do you ever think about the body being within yourself?

So let me ask you, in terms of the meditation we did this morning, which was an expansive meditation, what if you identified with that vast awareness as being who you really were, and this body was appearing within that awareness? Might that be a way that material form was seen as being in self?

So if we identify with the vastness of awareness as being who we really are, then body appears to be within self. "Or self as in material form." This is kind of the sense of the observer. "Oh, I'm really in the middle of the head behind the eyes. That's where I'm located. I'm somewhere in the body."

So what the Buddha is saying is that in relationship to the first aggregate of material form, we identify or we construct a sense of self in any one of these four ways. And you can see this in your experience, especially the first, second, and fourth are very clear and happen all the time. But this is considered to be misleading or deluded.

And we look at quote number 19, which is just above that: "In whatever way they conceive [of self], the truth is ever other than that."

Again, we have this word "conceive" that there was a question about yesterday. I bracketed the words "of self" because they're not actually in the text. The text is just "in whatever way they conceive, the truth is ever other than that." But the commentaries and Bhikkhu Bodhi as a translator said that generally the

word "conceive" is used to mean conceiving about oneself. So that's why I put those in bracket.

In whatever way we conceive of ourselves, the truth is ever other than that.

One of my teachers put it a little more directly. He said, "Everything you think is wrong."

So all these different ways—and then, of course, the Buddha goes through the other four aggregates in the same way—twenty different ways that identification is created, twenty ways that a view of self, a view of personhood can be created. The truth is ever other than that.

So what is the right understanding? We can look back to an earlier quote, number 11, which is on page three. To me, this is one of the most interesting of the Buddha's quotations on emptiness.

Venerable Ananda went to the Blessed One and said, "It is said that the world is empty, the world is empty, Lord. In what respect is it said that the world is empty?"

And the Buddha replies, "Insofar as it is empty of a self or anything pertaining to a self—that is why the world is empty." The Buddha then goes on to describe what is empty of a self, and it's all the six sense bases, internal and external, that we were just talking about.

So the world is empty of a self or anything pertaining to a self—or as the other translation I've often seen puts it, anything belonging to a self. This means that anytime we form and believe in these concepts of I and mine, we're not seeing clearly. This is the element of delusion that comes in.

There was another quote I think Sally mentioned yesterday. We're back on page five, quote number 14: "Nothing whatsoever is to be clung to."

Ajahn Buddhadasa offers a gloss on this in the next quote, number 15: "If one amplifies the meaning a little, it may be rendered as: no one should grasp at or cling to anything as being I or mine."

Because this is what we do, isn't it, when we take the body? We cling to the body either as being self or as belonging to self. And we have a lot of concern about the body, a lot of anxiety. We don't even like to get a little cut, much less lose a limb, much less lose our life.

Ajahn Buddhadasa continues: "As being I refers to the feeling called 'eyeing'—ahankara, the grasping at a soul or abiding ego entity. As being mine refers to the feeling called 'maying'—mamankara, the grasping at phenomena as being connected to ego or self."

I love these two words: ahankara and mamankara, which mean "eyeing" and "maying." We could think of it this way: The self is not a solid thing. We may have read a lot about Buddhism before we came to practice and think, "Oh, what I have to do is uproot the self." But there is no self there to begin with, so there's nothing to be uprooted.

The sense of self, though, can be felt. We can feel the grippingness, the solidity, the stickiness of the sense

of I—my body, myself, my feelings, and so on. This sense of I is created, but it's not there from the beginning.

So we can say that the self isn't a noun. It's not something we're going to find within this mind-body process. The self is a verb. We could more properly talk about "selfing."

And so the question is: How does the self take shape? We create it.

How important this is, the Buddha described in the next quotation, number 16. He was in conversation with Sariputta, one of his chief disciples. I find this a very poignant passage because you can almost hear the Buddha's lament in it. You can almost hear it as a sadness about the efficacy, the usefulness of his teaching.

He says to Sariputta, "Whether I teach the Dhamma briefly or at length, those who understand it are hard to find." Remember, this was his concern about whether to teach in the first place. He said beings have a lot of dust in their eyes—they won't get it. And here he's been teaching for quite a while, and he says, "Those who understand it are hard to find."

Sariputta replies, "Then, oh Blessed One, now is the time for it. Now is the time to teach the Dhamma in brief or at length. There will be those who will understand."

And the Buddha puts it very briefly here: "Well then, Sariputta, this is how the training should be done. Concerning this body with its consciousness, let there be no self-centered imaginings of I and mine and no such bias. With regard to external objects, let there be no self-centered imaginings of mine and no such bias. We shall then abide in the attainment of the heart's liberation and the liberation by wisdom."

This is a pointer to that state of peace you all were talking about, that you've discovered in meditation—and then the arising of disturbance around finding places for I and mine to fixate.

This is really the area, the state of peace as somewhere around the third noble truth. And the disturbance, the clinging, the making of I, somewhere around the first and second noble truths—some activity of craving that solidifies, constricts into a sense of self, a sense of I.

So take a look and explore through your meditations those times when there is a sense of greater peacefulness and see if at those times the sense of I is weak. Notice how the frequency of thoughts about I die down. In this state of peace, the actual sense of the I being formed is not so strong. When a disturbance comes, it tends to whip up the I thoughts—I or my—and see what that does to the sense of a self being there in those moments.

Another way to think about this in relation to the formation of self or self-view: does the I ever arise on its own? Do you ever have a sense where it just goes, "I..." Or is it always I and something else? Is it always about me in relationship to this pain in my knee, this mood in my mind, this relationship in my daily life, this view or opinion about something? The Buddha said there are four kinds of clinging: we cling to sense

pleasures, we cling to views, to rules and vows, and to a sense of self or a doctrine of self.

This is interesting to see. As you rest in some degree of peace and then find a disturbance, is that disturbance out of your control or did you have some part to play in it? Are you simply the victim of these disturbances or are you encouraging them in some way? For there really to be a disturbance or suffering, we have to take hold of it. We have to pick it up.

Someone mentioned that it was quite possible for different thoughts, moods, emotions to arise and pass, but there not be any reactivity around them. Other times we know very well that same thought, that same emotion could come and we make a big deal about it. So somewhere in relation to these events of our experience, it's when there's a fixation and a holding on to one piece of the passing show that the self is being created.

We could really say that the act of grasping itself creates a sense of self. So these three concepts go really well together: grasping, clinging, and fixation. Actually, in most of the Pali translations, grasping and clinging are translations of the same Pali word, which is upadana. You'll meet it again when we do dependent origination. So grasping usually refers in English to the momentary act where we first take hold of something. Clinging refers to the fact that sometimes that grasping happens for a while and doesn't let go. But they're both the same movement—there's a taking hold of.

So out of all the different elements of the passing show of phenomena, there's a fixation with our attention on one element and then a taking hold of. And once we've taken hold of, some narrowing happens. And in that, some kind of self is born, even if it's just: I'm the owner of this thing I've grasped, whether it's a problem or a pleasure. I'm defined by this grasping. It creates the sense of an I, simply because we've taken hold of it.

You can start to see this in your meditation practice. When we grow up as children, generally we have a lot more space. If we've had a reasonably cared for upbringing, we have a lot more space in the mind. Then as we come into adolescence and the ego formation gets further and further down the road, we tend to be thinking a lot. And as we grow up into adults, that thinking gets rather continuous. Most of the thoughts end up revolving around I, me, and mine.

If we don't see them—that is the factor of delusion—if we're not seeing the construction of self, if we haven't seen through the false identification, then these thoughts, one after another after another, tend to create an ongoing steady sense of self. This is how the self starts to feel solid, because we think it again and again and again. And this is usually our experience as we come into meditation.

So as we come into meditation, mindfulness develops, the ability to be in the present moment, concentration develops, and this flow of thoughts starts to slow down. And then we start to see it's not continuous, but there's some space. We can tune into that space between two thoughts. Then we start to feel some of the peace that has been discussed because if you look at the space between thoughts and

investigate its quality, it's generally of the nature of peace.

So then it may just be a brief moment of peace. More thoughts come in. We cling to those, the disturbance happens, we recreate the sense of self, we may be lost for a while. But as we continue our meditation, the mindful attention, the quality of concentration develops, the slowness happens, the sense of space starts to expand.

I'd say one of the greatest benefits of meditation, both in the short term and the long term, people describe as the development of the factor of equanimity. Equanimity is the last of the brahmaviharas and the last of the seven factors of enlightenment. And how it's felt is as a greater sense of inner space. We have more openness, more spaciousness, more acceptance of the coming and going of everything.

So as the equanimity develops, as the spaciousness develops, the self is being recreated less frequently, with less force, and because of the ongoing mindfulness, we're seeing it clearly.

We can see clearly the moment when a self arises out of a period of relatively little self. And then we can start to study that formation and how it makes us feel. Because normally the self and disturbance are connected. When selfing thoughts are going on and are strong, they're usually upsetting in some way because we're trying either to make things more pleasant or to make things less unpleasant. So there's that turmoil of activity.

Then we can start to see with what the Buddha described as wisdom. Phenomena come along, even if they're not pleasant, we don't have to make a self around them. So this is in the quote carried over at the top of the next page: "Bhikkhu, any kind of material form whatever... one sees it as it actually is with proper wisdom, thus: 'this is not mine, this I am not, this is not myself.'" And similarly for the other aggregates.

This is the activity of wisdom. One sees form, feeling, perception, formation, consciousness—but one doesn't put the label "I" or "mine" on any of it. In coming to relate with our own inner experience, as the Buddha was suggesting, the words "I" and "mine" aren't even necessary. Because truly, all there is is form, feeling, perception, formation, consciousness. Or if you like the six sense bases: sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and mind objects. There's no need for an "I" to arise in relation to any of it.

As our meditation practice deepens, this comes to be more and more our experience. These things are just arising, but they're not clung to as "I" or "mine." And this is wisdom—the wisdom that can liberate. Of course, sometimes the sense of "I" will still express itself, but when we're seeing clearly, we can see that and know that it's not true. We've investigated, we've seen the incorrectness of making that assumption, and we can let it go.

So when wisdom is active, there is not taking up the burden of self—even though there may be pain in the body, even though a difficult emotion may have come into the mind. The burden of self around these comings and goings goes out. And with that, the problem goes out.

Jack Kornfield had a wonderful meeting early in his practice days in Sri Lanka with an old monk who had a lot of happiness about him. This monk knew that Jack had trained in Thailand, and so he asked Jack, "Well, you've been practicing Buddhism. What's your understanding of the essence of what the Buddha taught?" And Jack said that the root understanding is that there is no self within this stream of phenomena, no fixed core. And the old monk said, "Yeah, no self, no problem." And he just laughed.

No self, no problem. When the self goes out, the problem goes out, even if there is still pain, even if there are still difficulties.

I just want to finish with a couple of quotes because I think they're so interesting. One from the Sutta Nipāta, one from the Middle Length Discourses: "Whatever be the phenomenon through which they think of seeking their self-identity, it turns out to be transitory. It becomes false, for what lasts for a moment is deceptive. The state that is not deceptive is nibbāna." And below: "His deliverance being founded upon truth is unshakable. For that is false which has a deceptive nature, and that is true which has an undeceptive nature: nibbāna. For this is the supreme noble truth, namely nibbāna."

As these phenomena of senses pass through us, we're deceived into thinking that they're objects. When the word illusion is applied to our misunderstanding, what we mistake is temporary passings for something real and lasting. This is the deceptive quality when we haven't seen fully with wisdom. Something that lasts for a moment we ascribe a longer duration to. Really all the phenomena of our senses, internal and external, are just temporary flashings. Sally was pointing to that last night in the talk on impermanence. But when we take them as enduring objects, then we think there's something that we can hang on to.

When we see how they're all simply coming and going, that that's really the truth of things, no one at the center, then our understanding shifts. And this is pointed to in this last quotation from the Visuddhimagga: "There is suffering, but there is no one who suffers. There is no doer of deeds, nor one who reaps their fruits. Empty phenomena roll on."

This view alone is right and true.

So by examining the self in this way and coming to see its constructed nature makes it easier to let go. When we can let go, we're returned to that place of peace and equanimity where everything has its life, all phenomena come and go, but we don't have to form a self-cling in relation to any of them. And when we don't form that self, then we're in alignment with the statement of the Buddha that the world is empty. We see the truth—the world is empty because there is no self or anything belonging to a self.

That's really what I wanted to share this morning, and we have time now for any comments, discussion, or questions.

A participant asked about the distinction between grasping, clinging, and fixation. I take fixation to be the moment where attention locks onto one of the phenomena that we're aware of and doesn't let go. So it's almost synonymous with clinging or grasping. Sometimes this word is helpful because it points to the fact

that out of all the things that have passed through our experience, we fixated on one of them. We could be aware of anything at any of the six sense doors, but we've selected out one and fixed the attention on it, and then with grasping behind it, become fixated.

Now it's possible to direct the attention to something without the quality of grasping. We could select breath as a meditation focus and not have a quality of grasping about it. But when I use the word fixation, I mean singling out something and having some energy of grasping at the same time.

Another question arose about whether all thoughts are self-conceiving. Not all thoughts are self-conceiving. The Buddha uses the word conceiving, as I understand it, to refer to thoughts about self. There are many thoughts that are not self-conceiving or even self-referencing. A thought of generosity, a thought of loving kindness, a thought of compassion—these don't necessarily have to be motivated by any kind of selfing.

Someone shared experiencing fatigue and headaches when contemplating these teachings, asking how to work with that resistance. Many different hindrances come into the middle of meditation and into the middle of Dharma talks. I would work with it like any hindrance. The most important thing when it happens is not to try to keep focusing on the words and concepts or quotations, but to restore your inner balance.

I'd suggest letting go of the content of the talk and the quotations being referred to, and just be mindful of the sense in the body—the pressure in the head, the experience of tiredness that you feel. Breathe a little until you feel yourself coming back to balance. When you feel ready again and restored, then come back into the content. The main thing is to restore your own sense of balance first.

This is a really important and big topic, which is the integration, you could say, of the conventional and ultimate levels of understanding.

I had another whole piece of this talk that I just didn't have time for today, which is what the conventional sense of self means and how it's a valid thing to consider. For instance, the Buddha's teaching on anatta doesn't mean that everything in the universe gets coagulated into one primordial lump. We are still separate beings to some extent.

We have our own bodies, speaking conventionally. We have our own paths. We have our own hindrances. We have our own minds and emotions. For example, the Buddha became enlightened, but that didn't solve my problem. He clarified his mind stream. That didn't clarify my mind stream. So we are still acknowledged to be individual beings, with the responsibilities that involves.

From a conventional point of view, you could call this person a being, could call yourself a being, or you could call it a self. Conventionally, we could say this accumulation of mental and physical phenomena, which I call a being, I could also call my conventional self. That's perfectly fine as long as we understand that this is all changing. There's nothing fixed within it.

Then we come into the realm of what makes sense for selves or beings as modes of interaction. The discussion shifts to the realm of intention, because how we relate to each other depends on our intentions in carrying out actions of thought, speech, and body.

Here in the realm of intention, the important factors—wholesome, skillful factors to consider—are generosity, loving-kindness, compassion. Generosity, loving-kindness, compassion are really spoken of as relational factors. They're factors that have to do with one human being relating to another, with the assumption of different beings, separate beings.

That realm has its own laws. It's very important to understand it and work within it and not to discount it. It would be like the politician who said, "There are no rich, there are no poor, we're all interconnected." That's an example of using the ultimate level of understanding to deny the conventional.

So we want to be able, as practice develops, to work easily within the conventional level of human relations and responsibility and care for one another—care for children, care for family, for parents, and so on. That's a really important part of our human experience.

But if we don't join that with this other understanding that there's no abiding self or core in any of it, then we don't know how to free ourselves from the suffering or entanglement of the world of relationships.

Really, as we mature as practitioners, we want to be able to go back and forth between seeing the conventional way of looking, which makes for harmonious relationships and skillful development of our own hearts, and then also to be able to see this ultimate level of truth—of empty phenomena rolling on, coming and going—so that we don't cling.

The two come together because when we're not clinging, we're not disturbed inwardly, and that's a state that we're referring to as empty of self. That's a state from which generosity, love, and compassion come naturally. So the two really support one another. As we refine our outer relationships through generosity, loving-kindness, compassion, there's less inner turmoil for us to deal with. The mind calms more easily and we can see these deeper truths more evidently.

"In the past I was taught a method of focusing on the head, putting my awareness there as feeling that sense of ease and then noticing when any disturbance would happen. So that was focusing on one particular part of the body. In the exercise you taught us this morning it was more of a spacious awareness, containing everything. I'm wondering—I'm guessing that both are skillful under different circumstances and haven't experimented enough with the spacious practice to have much experience with that. But I wonder if you could give me some comments on under what circumstances you think either one might be skillful."

You know, there are so many different meditation techniques and all of them in our tradition aim to bring some natural sense of peace and ease. Some of them are very narrowly focused. A lot of people start off doing meditation on the breath just at the tip of the nose. It's a very narrow focus, but as it's developed, it

brings about quite a lot of peace and ease.

Other people may feel the breath in the abdomen or the whole body. Some people like to work with the whole body posture as an anchor. Other people like to work with sounds or the vastness as we did this morning. Every one of those techniques is designed to bring in both the feeling of tranquility or peace and ease and the opportunity for insight. So it's a very personal question which one works best for an individual.

So I just encourage people to try different ones, see where they resonate, and then work with that for a while. In general, the basic guideline is that the narrower focus strengthens the quality of tranquility, while the broader focus strengthens the quality of relaxation. They both point in the same direction, and then it's simply a question of finding which one gives the right balance for your particular circumstances.

We need to stop there, as we have interviews in just a few minutes followed by a walking period.

A few announcements about the interviews, which will begin this morning in small group format. Gil is located in the council house across the drive where you registered. Sally is in room one, and I'm in room two. Those rooms are just beyond the bathrooms—outside the meditation hall, turn left down that corridor.

The purpose of the interviews is really for us to check in on your personal experience. We'd like to hear about how things are going for you personally—perhaps how you're settling into the retreat, how the meditations are developing for you, or how the themes in the talks are settling and integrating into your experience. The interviews aren't meant to be discussions of the readings or concepts themselves, though certainly as they affect you personally, that's welcome. Keep it personally based—that's really what we'd like to hear about in the short time we have with you.

One other announcement: we'll have practice leaders covering some of the sittings during the day. There's quite a full schedule for us as teachers with the talks, interviews, and discussion periods. For some of the sittings, we'll ask practice leaders to sit up front and lead the opening and closing bells. If you'd like to do that, there's a sign-up sheet on the bulletin board where you can volunteer for any of the available sittings in the next few days. We appreciate your help.

Gil is thinking very practically—half of you will be seen today in interviews. If your name wasn't on today's list, it will be on tomorrow's. He asks that if you don't have an interview this morning, perhaps you could let those who do have interviews go to the bathroom first. This will ease the beginning of the interview groups.

Thank you for your attention, and enjoy the walking period.

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