Patterns of Becoming 1: Introduction

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:02:33

Thank you.

I want to explore with you over the next few weeks the patterns around the creation of the self in the teachings of the Buddha. I'm sure you know that the Buddha said this sense of self is not intrinsic to the experience of being a human in a body, but is something that we generate out of our views and beliefs and concepts. And at the same time, this sense of self is what limits us so strongly.

When you look at the basic human potential, we have this limitless awareness with a capacity to fill it with a boundless sense of loving kindness. That's the reality of our nature. And yet, how often do we open to that immensity? Or how often is our attention contracted and constricted and made small by this sense of self and self-concern?

You can track it moment by moment. How many moments during the day were you in that vast space of openness and boundless loving-kindness? How many moments of the day was there concern about how am I doing? So we generate this concern about the I over and over and over again out of certain predictable ways of thinking and feeling and acting. And it's this regeneration again and again in the belief in something solid being pointed to with the sense of I that creates a lot of the sense of bondage.

So I want to explore in these talks over the next three weeks how this sense of self gets put together, and then how the tools of the Dharma allow us to understand it, not be taken in by it, and return the mind to that original sense of vastness, openness, and boundlessness.

In one way the description of the limitation is really simple. Pascal talked last night about clinging and the four types of clinging. The Buddha said at one point, "Don't cling to anything whatsoever. One who has heard this has heard all the dharmas. One who has practiced this has practiced all the dharmas." That's really simple, right?

Or consider the second and third noble truths. The cause of suffering is craving. The third noble truth, the end of suffering, is the end of craving. Oh, it's so simple. So it's just craving or clinging. But each of those has lots of layers and operates in so many subtle ways in our minds and in our experience that the mechanics of suffering actually get pretty complex.

So what we want to look at is all the mechanics that go into the creation, the generation, the continuing regeneration of this sense of self because it's our fundamental human activity, reasserting the I and the mind and how that involves us with suffering and then how we can get free from it.

The concepts that I'll bring in tonight and over these talks are drawn from the very central teachings of the Buddha. So we'll touch on the Four Noble Truths, dependent origination, karma, not-self, conceptual proliferation, becoming, the end of karma, nibbana, and freedom. All these central teachings are pointing to the same thing: where we get caught and limited and small and how we release that to return to our basic openness and vastness. All the teachings are pointing to the same movement. So that's what we want to explore in some detail.

And I also have to warn you, this is the first time I've tried to put this stuff together. So it's still a little chaotic in my own mind. The risk is that you're going to get bored and I'm going to feel stupid. So just to set expectations accordingly.

The thing that I notice at the beginning of a retreat is we come into this quiet place, we don't have very much to do, we've dropped all our outer activity which was so busy and kept the mind in such a momentum of thinking and feeling and doing and planning and creating. We come into this really simple environment.

Does that mental activity stop? Not right away, does it? I mean, the first few days, that's what we hear from you a lot in interviews. "Wow, the mind is still so busy or so restless." In between, it falls asleep, but when it wakes up, it gets really busy again.

So why is that? You know, why can't we just look at the situation and say, "Oh, I don't need to be so busy now. I'm in a meditation retreat. I can just stop thinking." Why is it so difficult to stop?

I think the thing is that that level of doing has a lot of momentum. And it's driven partly out of habit and it's driven partly out of deep emotional tendencies. So we'll look at that a little bit.

But this process of stopping is very valuable in meditation. And a lot of you are mentioning how it's slowing down and sometimes coming to real peace already in these first few days. And of course this is really important. This quality of non-doing is a very high value in Buddhism. Of course we need to do in our worldly life. We need to do in our meditation. But in meditation it's all leading to this ability to not do.

Non-doing is indeed a very high value and profoundly freeing. Carol and I were on staff at IMS in the late 70s together with another good friend, Steve Armstrong, who remains close to us today. We did a staff retreat early on when we were there, and at the end of the retreat, we discovered that Steve had spent his time drawing up an advertising brochure for IMS. That's what Yogi Mind does—it gets really creative.

Steve had a set of colored pencils and created a three-page fold-out brochure advertising Insight Meditation Society. It featured things like "the vacation of your dreams: no talking, no swimming, no eating after noon, no tennis, no golf," and on and on. The motto for the center, positioned prominently at the center of the opening page, was: "It's better to do nothing than to waste time."

We can take that as a pointer. It's better to do nothing than to do lots of things, in fact. But this isn't so

easy, even for people at fairly advanced levels of practice.

One of the teachers who has inspired me in recent years, and whom some of my friends follow quite closely, is a young Tibetan Lama named Mingyur Rinpoche. He has an organization that spans the world, with monasteries in Nepal and India, headquarters in Minneapolis, and thousands of students around the globe. I would say he has thousands of monks and nuns, and another set of thousands of lay students. He's a very impressive being, probably about 35 now, possessing this combination—much like the Dalai Lama—of very deep meditation practice and broad outer vision. He has many projects in the world, but he's someone who has completed extensive retreat practice and study, with a profound meditation background and philosophical understanding.

So here he was, 35 years old, with all this responsibility—monasteries, nunneries, monastic followers, lay followers. About a year and a half ago, Mingyur Rinpoche announced he was going to drop it all and go into three-year retreat. This past May, he was in Bodh Gaya preparing to leave. Everyone thought there would be time to say goodbye, wish him well, make sure he got on the right bus, and pack his toothbrush for him. Then one day he simply wasn't there anymore. People went to bring him his lunch and found his room empty. He had left without his toothbrush, his passport, or any money. He had simply walked away into the middle of India because this call toward realization through non-doing was so strong. He had felt a deep call since he was a teenager to return to three-year retreat, and he left his entire worldly organization, commitments, and responsibilities in the hands of others.

I can't tell you how inspired I was by this. This is what the old masters used to do—they would say that the realization of the Buddha's teaching is more important than trying to take care of things in the world. I really admired his example and look forward to doing something similar at some point. Not three years—Mingyur Rinpoche isn't married.

So where does all this energy behind doing come from? I want to suggest a kind of source. If we look closely, I think on some level we all know that the world isn't really a secure place. We've noticed the changing nature of things. We've tried to construct happiness over 20, 30, 40 or more years, and it hasn't really come to a lasting, solid place yet. We're aware of the impermanent and insecure underpinning of the whole enterprise.

I think it's as a defense against seeing that total amount of change, impermanence, and lack of security that the psyche wants to try to construct something lasting—and that's why it embarks on the enterprise of the self. We can't find consistency out there, so let's see if we can find it in here, in this concept around "I."

One of the ways we go about this—the "I," as you've noticed, likes pleasure and doesn't like pain—is to try to feed it. How can we keep the pleasant coming and the unpleasant not coming? And let's not look too closely at what we do while we do that.

I would say these are the three fundamental strategies of mind that let us cope with the truth of insecurity, the truth of impermanence. The first is the force of desire. Because I know things are always going to be changing, let me try to keep the pleasant coming all the time. This is the mind movement of greed or *lobha* .

The second basic strategy is to try to be secure by always pushing away the unpleasant. This has two modes. One is the aggressive mode, which really pushes against what's unpleasant or threatening—the mode of anger. The other is the fear mode, which instead of pushing, tries to pull back and move away from anything threatening.

Both of these are the motive force of aversion. Then the third strategy is simply not wanting to look too closely at what we're doing, because if we did, we'd see it wouldn't work. This clouding over is the work of delusion.

So these are the three poisons: greed, aversion, and delusion. Greed and aversion are always accompanied by delusion, or they wouldn't be able to sustain themselves. Delusion also keeps us out of touch with what's happening, providing another way of insulating ourselves or taking a step back from the impingement of that contact Pascal spoke about last night.

These are the three basic forces of mind, and it's important to see that these are strategies. They're not accidents that happen to have been planted in the psyche by some alien force. These grow out of the human heart. This is how we all try to cope with the uncertainty of existence, with our situation. When Carol mentioned in her talk that the essence of samsara is trying to correct, these are the mechanisms we use to carry out that correction.

You can see this in the days you've been here already. Why are the sittings not completely peaceful? Because we're trying to make the body a little more comfortable, or do away with that pain and tension that's cropped up in our shoulder blade. Or we're trying to return to that concentrated, peaceful sitting we had earlier in the day. Or trying to feel again the great loving-kindness we had for our benefactor. Or trying to push away the fear, anxiety, anger, or resentment that's arising in the moment. We keep trying to make it just a little bit better. A little bit better. And this is the action of greed and aversion supported by delusion. It keeps us from peace, from rest, from ease, and from non-doing.

This is basically the activity of the self. Now, there's another word for this kind of activity because it has motivation: this is karma. Karma in the Buddhist language is simply action with an intention or motive. So another way to describe this is that we're constantly acting, trying to get something from the situation. And it's all about myself—all these little adjustments.

Did you spend a lot of time today worrying about the global economy? Do you spend much time worrying about the unemployment rate being at 8.3 percent? I mean, maybe we should be spending more time worrying about climate change, for example. But most of our worries tend to be about me.

Ajahn Amaro, who's now the abbot of Amaravati in England, has this great talk title. He has a talk on becoming—which is also about the formation of self—and the subtitle is "Why Public Speaking is More Terrifying Than Worldwide Nuclear Destruction." It kind of is, isn't it?

Because we sense this underlying uncertainty, openness, and impermanence, we want to build a sense of I that can bring in some degree of solidity. We need to keep fortifying that sense of I because it's not inherently there. So every time a new experience comes along, we need to sweep it into this creation of self. As we go throughout our day, we take the events of the day and use them to recreate the sense of I. We generally create some kind of self-image or self-view that lasts over time, which we can bolster through this process.

We form a self-image that should extend over time so we can have the sense that the I is something. Interestingly enough, karmic patterns tend to reinforce that image. It's like the patterns and the image start to reinforce each other, so things that begin as just a single passing thought solidify over time.

This is one way it's been expressed: "The thought becomes an intention. The intention manifests as an action. The action develops into habit, and habit hardens into character. Therefore, watch closely the thought and let it spring from love for all beings." This quote has been attributed to the Buddha, but I haven't been able to find it in the texts and I don't know the source of it.

But I want to read it again because it's quite important: "The thought becomes an intention. The intention manifests as an action. The action develops into habit, and habit hardens into character."

You know, especially at my age, having observed a lot of the passing years and seeing the formation of character, I really feel the reality of this. And once character is formed, it's not so easy to undo. I wish I had known this when I was twenty, because character is really so much more malleable when we're young. So I really just want to welcome all the young people in the audience and express how happy I am that you are receiving this wisdom while you're growing up, when you still have so much openness available.

It's interesting that neuroscience is confirming a lot of this. The formation of character out of habit that's repeated many times is captured in what neuroscientists say: neurons that fire together wire together. As they repeat and repeat and repeat a similar associated action, they get wired together in a way that makes it likely that pattern will happen again and again. I was curious about the source of this quote and thought perhaps it had come out of recent research in the last ten years. Actually, this came from a neuropsychologist in 1949, so this understanding has been around for quite a while.

Our own actions—of mind, of speech, and of body—really shape the mind and its patterns, its habits, the character that gets formed from them, even when it's not appropriate to the setting. Just like coming in from a busy life, the momentum of our thinking actions carry over into here.

There are many different patterns that happen for people. The one that I brought into meditation was a

habit of fear. I can sort of trace the origin of this in my early twenties. I had some very confusing episodes as I was getting into early adulthood that left me with a lot of fear in my body, which then came out as I got quiet and meditated.

One year in England in the early eighties, I'd gone over to do a period of retreat with Christopher Titmuss and Christina Feldman. This was the forerunner of Gaia House, called East Farmhouse—a beautiful little rented house out in the country in Wiltshire, not far from Salisbury. It was rented from a retired colonel from the British military who didn't have a clue what we were doing there.

One of the people in the organizing group was an honorable—that means he's the son of a lord, and he can put "honorable" on his checking account. When the colonel saw that there was an honorable involved in the organization, he said, "He must be a good guy. Son of a lord—I'll rent the house to him." So the honorable's name was on the lease, but the colonel didn't know what was going on in the house. He would periodically drop in to visit.

So he came at one time during a meditation period, and they showed him around the house—he wanted to make sure things were being taken care of. They took him into the conservatory and the kitchen and the front room. But the meditation hall in this little house was in a small back room that looked out onto the back garden—you might call it a drawing room or a parlor.

They felt they had to show him that room too. Well, that's where the meditation was going on. They opened the door for the colonel, who of course had no idea what was happening. It happened to be a period of standing meditation—twenty-five people standing stock still and silent in the middle of the colonel's drawing room. They opened the door and he looked upon this sight. Then they closed the door, and all he could say was, "Well, you certainly have them well trained, don't you?"

So that was our summer at East Farmhouse. It was really a beautiful location. We were there in July, and one evening—the colonel was not there—I was doing standing meditation in the back garden. My eyes were closed and I was standing out on the grass. This fear was coming, as it came often in those days in my practice. I was just trying to be grounded and feel it in the body and open to it in the mind. It just kept coming.

For some reason, in the middle of that standing meditation, I just decided to open my eyes.

And I was standing next to a tree that was in bloom. The petals were scattered all around me. The sun was going down and the garden was bathed in that golden light of evening's last rays. The birds were beginning their twilight calls, preparing to settle for the night. The whole scene was held in this soft British air, with just enough humidity to make it feel like something out of a storybook—like something from Jane Austen. It was so beautiful, so soft, so utterly reassuring.

I just thought to myself, "Wow, it's really a scary world, isn't it?" Here I was in this state of fear in a beautiful and completely safe environment. The fear had no relation to where I was or what I was doing.

It was so out of place. But that's what happens with these patterns, these karmic patterns. I was simply continuing to frighten myself for no reason whatsoever.

These habits, these patterns that we find ourselves in, come into the mind and naturally they come into the body as well. So often as we come to practice, we see the movements of mind and feel those directly in our body. This is why it's so important that we begin retreat—and I really trust everyone who's practicing this way—by learning to bring mindfulness throughout the body, so that we can truly feel the life of the body, make space for all the emotions that live there, and get to know our emotional life through meeting it in the body.

Sometimes there's a lot of old information stored there that we need to really fill with our awareness, pervade with our awareness, so that it can be felt and then released. This mindfulness of the body, which is the first foundation the Buddha taught, is so essential for coming to know ourselves and connecting with this heritage of our own karma, our own actions—mental actions and outer actions.

All these past actions create patterns that express themselves in our feelings, in our thoughts, and then in our actions in life. I'm sure you can see in your own personality what some of these patterns are. Everybody has patterns of strength that come from wholesome qualities: kindness or generosity, understanding, happiness, contentment. Those patterns fill one's life. And we all work with patterns of difficulty.

As meditators, you've probably become quite familiar with what those patterns are for you. For many of us in meditation, these patterns of our mental actions become the single biggest challenge in life as we come to understand our makeup and conditioning—the patterns that live within us, within our mind and within our body.

The one I had to work with for a long time was fear, and I received a great deal—I really appreciate its presence because I learned so much from it. For others, it could be self-judgment or shame. It could be various kinds of addiction or dependencies. We all work with different aspects of these legacies.

When people have been abused early in life, sometimes the patterns they're left with are not so much from their own generation, their own creation, as what has been imposed on them through that mistreatment. But nonetheless, they continue to live until they're understood and can be released. There's not as much of a sense of ownership with them.

We start to understand ourselves in this way, and these patterns and our self-view begin to reinforce each other. I understood myself as someone who was fearful. Then the fear would continue, and that would confirm this understanding, this view, which would hold it in place. The self-view supports the pattern. The pattern supports the self-view. How do we work beyond it?

There's an interesting sutta that describes how some of this gets rolling. It's called the Honeyball—number 18 in the Majjhima Nikaya. There's a story with many of these suttas, so I want to tell the story as well,

because you get a glimpse of the life of the Buddha and the culture of that time in India. This was about 500 BCE.

The Buddha was living at this time in Kapilavatthu, which is where he had grown up. After much wandering, he returned periodically to the place of his childhood. Many of his monks and close disciples came from there, including his attendant, Ananda. Ananda is with him in this story, so we assume this is in the Buddha's later years, because Ananda became his attendant for the last twenty-five years of his life—from the time he was fifty-five onward. So let's say the Buddha was in his late middle age, probably somewhere between fifty-five and sixty years old. He was quite established as a teacher by this time and never betrayed much self-doubt. He had developed great confidence by this point.

So he was in meditation when someone approached him whose name was Dandapani. From the name and the commentary, the name refers to a stick, and we understand that he was walking with a stick—a golden stick, according to the commentary. Even though Dandapani was a young man, he carried this golden stick, giving the impression that he was something of a dandy, as the name suggests.

At this time in India, spiritual seekers delighted in debating one another. It was like ultimate cage fighting, but on a verbal level. If you could knock the other person out of the ring, you established yourself as the best teacher in that area.

Dandapani probably came from that background when he approached the Buddha. After what the text calls "courteous greetings"—though one wonders how courteous they actually were—he stood to one side, leaned on his stick, and asked the Blessed One: "What does the recluse assert? What does he proclaim?"

This was not a very respectful greeting for the time, so you get the feeling Dandapani was just waiting for the Buddha to say something so he could launch an attack.

The Buddha, who was no fool, replied: "Friend, I assert and proclaim such a teaching that one does not quarrel with anyone in the world."

That response cut the ground right out from under Dandapani. When this was said, Dandapani shook his head, wagged his tongue, and raised his eyebrows until his forehead was puckered in three lines. Then he departed, leaning on his stick.

We can see that Dandapani was frustrated by the Buddha's refusal to engage in contention with him. The Buddha then related this story to the monks and went off for a rest. The monks, talking among themselves, wondered: "What exactly did the Blessed One mean by a doctrine whereby one doesn't dispute with anyone?"

A senior monk named Mahakaccana was present. Mahakaccana was said to be the monk who was foremost in explaining in detail what the Buddha had explained in brief. So they asked him what the Buddha meant, and Mahakaccana delivered the bulk of this sutta.

He explained it like this: "Dependent on the eye and forms, eye consciousness arises. The meeting of the three is contact."

As Pascal mentioned last night, when the eye is working and there are sights to be seen, these come together in eye consciousness—the experience of seeing. This is what we're doing all the time when our eyes are open. Eye consciousness is arising with different content as different forms and sights meet us.

"With contact as condition, there is feeling." Again, as Pascal explained, this feeling can be either pleasant, unpleasant, or neither. This is how we get impinged upon all the time with this changing array of pleasure and displeasure in life.

"What one feels, that one perceives." Now we're getting close to the heart of the sutta, which is this quality of perception. Perception means something a little different in Buddhist terminology than in Western philosophy or psychology. In Western thought, perception typically refers to the sense data itself—I perceive means I have a sight.

In the Buddhist teaching, that's called contact or seeing consciousness. Perception is a higher-level function of the mind, more cognitive, that recognizes what has been seen and puts it in a category. In looking around this room, what we really see is patches of form and color—that's all the eye actually sees. But then there's this organizing principle in the brain that puts everything into categories, and we see men and women and cushions and chairs, walls, lamps, doors, paintings, and so on.

That recognition piece is the act of perception. We're classifying the world into categories that we know based on memory. Perception is a fascinating thing to investigate because the world kind of springs up from perception, and that's what this sutta is pointing to.

"What one perceives, that one thinks about." This is true, isn't it? When we recognize something, we'll often start to think about that thing we've just seen.

"What one thinks about, that one mentally proliferates." And here's the catch—we don't just think about things in a simple way.

"That's a thangka of the Buddha. It's painted in the Tibetan style. It represents Shakyamuni Buddha, who is Gautama Buddha in our tradition," and let it go like that. But we start going, "Wow, that is such a cool thangka. I'd like to have one like that in my living room. Now, Marianne has some art down in the bookstore. I know I shouldn't go down during the retreat, but if I don't, somebody else might get there first. And I do have my checkbook. It's up in my room, but I could go now, right after the sitting, and get the checkbook and go down and look for that thangka. And if they don't have a thangka like that, I think a metal Tibetan Buddha would be just as good. I saw last time I was in there, there were some bronze ones, there were some gold ones. One was a little more expensive, but oh, my checking account is so low. Uh-oh. I don't know if I have enough money to write a check. What? Could I call my partner who's at home and get them to deposit a check into my account? If they write my bank number on the back, the bank will

accept the deposit. Now, what is my bank number? But I'm not sure my partner has enough money for the Buddha either, so I better call a friend."

This is where the proliferation starts from just the thinking. And this is described by the Pali word papañca. It's much nicer than proliferation. Papañca.

So this is where the trouble begins. Because as we start to mentally proliferate, we don't always stay in neutral territory. It's only a few steps from the thangka to our checkbook to the absence of money in our checking account. How are we going to get it there? And so on. And that creates anxiety and worry. So because the "I" is so central, our thoughts tend to run around the "I," and that creates disturbance.

And so this is what the Buddha points to—actually Mahākaccāna, but essentially the Buddha—points to in the next line: "With what one has mentally proliferated as the source, perceptions and notions tinged by mental proliferation beset a person with respect to past, future, and present forms cognizable through the eye."

Perceptions and notions beset a person. So listen to how this is unfolded. At first, it's just kind of a passive process. Eye consciousness arises. With contact as a condition, feeling arises. That's just passive. It's just happening, impersonal.

Now we turn to action. What one feels, that one perceives. So now there's kind of an active mental component, which is the recognizing and classifying of the thing. What one perceives, one thinks about. So once we've identified the thangka, then we think about it a little bit. Tibetan thangka, Buddha image, Gautama Buddha. So this is active, but it's not really yet problematic because it's staying close to the source. We're still in charge, as it were.

But notice what happens in the next line: "With what one has mentally proliferated, perceptions and notions beset one with regard to past, present, and future." All of a sudden, we're not in charge anymore, but stuff is starting to assault us. Based on past associations, based on our patterns, based on our karma, based on our clinging and cravings, we become the victim of our own thoughts and feelings.

So these thoughts and feelings come together. Sometimes a thought triggers a feeling. Sometimes a feeling triggers a thought. They run together. And papañca brings it all back to us. So we expose ourselves to kind of the craziness of the mind just running on at that point. And that's the activity of papañca.

And it starts from perception. That's what the sutta is pointing to—this first recognition of a thing. So if we just say man, woman, chair, wall, door, light, there's nothing too charged, right? That's pretty easy.

But what if the perception is of something that we care about? Let's start with something simple. If I say "car," you can perceive that, right? It brings up an image. Fairly neutral. Car—pretty generic. It's a tool we all use.

What if I say "Prius"? How do you feel? We like Prius. Environmentally friendly. My friends drive them.

Fifty miles to the gallon. Not so expensive. Uses electricity. Good feeling, right?

Now what if I say "Hummer"? How does that feel? Oh, too big. Gas guzzler. Uses too much petroleum. Pollutes the atmosphere. Not so happy about Hummer.

So we have different perceptions based on our values. Or you could say that perception carries a felt meaning. There's some kind of mood with this action of perception. And it's the felt meaning which we've acquired through association, through our own investment, that triggers a lot of the feelings with perception.

Simple example. I did a six-week retreat one year doing loving-kindness practice at IMS on the East Coast, and my difficult person was on the retreat. So I would go along and I was having a lot of metta—self, benefactor, friend. It was rolling really well. Then my difficult person would walk across my field of vision. Perception of difficult person, and I'd spin out into anger. I'd remember all the difficult things that had happened in the past year. And I could be lost for ten minutes, twenty minutes, thirty minutes.

I'd been in a state of a lot of metta. My body was soft and open and relaxed. And then I moved into this anger, and it was like everything turned into a steel trap. It was so painful to go into that. So it took me quite a while to learn how to work with that situation again. And it came out of all the past associations that I had with that person and then all the papañca that came in relating to the past, what I might say in the future—that whole range of relationship stuff based on the papañca, based on the perception.

Here's another one: empty chair. Pretty neutral, right? What's the big deal about an empty chair?

But depending on the setting, empty chair can have really different perception qualities. So if I'm in a social setting—could be a meeting, could be a conference, could even be a retreat—and I get to the dining room early, and I sit at a table where nobody else is sitting, but I have two empty chairs beside me, that feels fine. As the dining hall starts to fill up and all the other chairs are filled in, if my chairs are still empty, oh, that starts to feel a little weird. I start to feel isolated, unlikable. "Oh, nobody wants to sit next to me. What's wrong with me?"

Nobody likes me.

So the empty chairs start to take on a threatening quality—I begin to perceive them as something menacing. And then somebody comes along and sits in one and I feel so grateful. Oh, I've been rescued. Rescued from my loneliness. Thank you.

So that's one empty chair experience. This relates to how papañca, according to the teachings, comes in three flavors. It can be generated out of craving, out of views, or out of the comparing mind. This particular scenario was generated out of some view—oh, maybe people don't like me, maybe there's something wrong with me. Some view about myself, about not being self-worthy.

Here's another papañca example with an empty chair. I'm on an airplane with the aisle seat, having gotten

on early. People are boarding, and I'm watching everybody come down the aisle. I feel genuine compassion for people because traveling is so stressful these days. Here comes a mother down the aisle with two children, carrying all their gear as well as her carry-on. I feel tremendous compassion and friendliness toward them.

The airplane is filling up, getting nearly full, and the seat next to me is still empty. Wow. Now I really like the empty chair. I might have a whole flight from San Francisco to Boston with an empty seat next to me. Suddenly everybody coming down the aisle becomes a threat. I hope they don't take my empty seat. I don't want them to sit there. And if they look like they're about to, I become genuinely aversive.

This time, the perception is that the empty chair protects my space—this is the craving aspect. I like my space on a long flight. Same empty chair, but a completely different perception based on that particular assumption or papañca. The first example was the view component; this one is the craving component.

Let me share another example of perception. When I was sitting that retreat over Thanksgiving, we spent quite a few hours in the hall during the day—about eight hours total with everything combined. Some periods were quite long, and my legs would get sore. I'd adjust my posture in the middle of a sit or during a talk, trying to sit through but getting better as the days progressed.

There was a monk on the retreat, sitting up front, who would come in for the afternoon sit. He'd settle down on his cushion at about two o'clock. We'd break for walking period—I'd get up and walk, come back in, sit. He was still sitting. We'd sit through the next period or talk, then get up again. He'd still be sitting there. He would start at two and continue until about five without moving.

Meanwhile, here I would be, squirming after an hour or so. I'd tough it out, then get up for walking meditation, thinking to myself, "Oh my God, I'm such a crummy sitter."

After all these years I'm supposed to be a meditation teacher and I can't sit like that. Here he was, younger than me, though admittedly with many years of monastic training and countless hours of sitting. I thought, I'm such a crummy meditator.

Then at the end of the retreat, one of the other women who had been sitting approached me. "Wow," she said, "you really sat well this retreat. You sat like a rock." I couldn't believe it. I was squirming all the time, but apparently when she looked at me, she saw someone sitting absolutely still. In her mind, I was a good sitter because she was comparing herself to me. But when I compared myself to the monk, I was not a good sitter.

The same experience, yet entirely different depending on whether you're comparing up or down. It's all relative. There's no intrinsic worth to my sitting on that retreat, but I could feel either inferior or superior, depending on where I chose to place my attention, how I chose to perceive.

These are really simple things—empty chairs, length of time sitting. But what if the perception involves

your partner, your child, your parent, your body?

A couple of weeks ago, Sally and James and I had the opportunity to visit an anatomy lab at a college in Santa Cruz. We spent time sitting and standing next to bodies that students had dissected. These were cadavers from a hospital, and the students had dissected them quite thoroughly.

I found myself standing with half a skull in my hand that still had the brain in it. At first, when we stood next to the bodies, the faces were wrapped in cloth. We could see the opened bodies and examine the organs. Partway through, the professor removed the wrappings from the faces, and it became deeply moving.

The particular body we stood beside first was an elderly man. He was quite small—not that tall to begin with, and as we age, we shrink. As we approach death, we tend to shrink even more. His face held an expression that wasn't passive. It didn't look like he had died in complete peace. His mouth was open, and there was a suggestion of anguish at his death. It was profoundly moving because you could sense the end of his life in his facial expression. And it wasn't going to change.

The purpose of these reflections and experiences is to imagine: what if that was me? What if I'm looking at my own face as a little shrunken old man? This could happen next year, or in ten or twenty years, but it's going to happen. What if I was looking at myself?

This is a perception with the power to trigger papañca—a perception that can grab us based on our clinging to this body, our investment in loving and caring for this form we've tended for so long. While many perceptions we encounter throughout the day are fairly light, some come along that are quite striking.

We want to start noticing when a perception forms that we begin to proliferate around. What are the moods and emotions that arise in that proliferation? Because of both our self-image and the patterns of mind we've developed over countless actions, we have predictable responses to things. As meditators, we begin to know our own patterns: I'm a fearful person, or greedy, or aversive, or shameful, or self-critical, or addictive.

We start to see how when we meet new incidents and perceive something, the proliferation spun off from that perception—the way the mind spins out around it—recreates our sense of self. The sense of self is not intrinsic to that experience. Like the empty chair, there's nothing inherent there. But my perception of it can fill it with content from my patterns, my karma, my mental habits, my emotional inclinations.

So we want to be alert to this. When we spin out, how are we spinning? What is the response showing us about the "I," about the self? And is it possible at times that we have a perception—even around something meaningful and charged—and we don't spin out? What's the quality of that experience? What's the quality of that kind of moment when we have a perception that may be meaningful, yet we don't proliferate around it?

It may be deeply felt, but we don't spin out through over-proliferation about it. What happens then? We're holding that experience in the silence. We're receiving that experience. We can feel it—we can feel the pathos of it, we can feel the compassion in it, we can feel the loving kindness in it—but we're not spinning out with it. We hold it in this silence which has a kind of intrinsic peace.

And so there's not the creation of the self again. There's not the regeneration of the self-image. There's not the reconnecting to that old pattern, which is our way of becoming and finding a self-identity to establish ourselves in.

Likes and dislikes, which we do constantly, are largely about establishing "me" again. We meet someone, and we have to decide whether we like them or not. Why? Because that recreates the self with its tastes. Instead, we can just see—there's that person. We can feel their essence, but we don't have to take a stand for or against. Then we're not recreating the self with its wanting and not wanting, its likes and dislikes. Things are just held in this great spaciousness.

This is what we're developing here: the ability to hold experience in this great kind of non-reactive spaciousness that sees things as they are. When the old patterns come in, they tend to blind us to a degree. They narrow the sense of possibility in our universe to the predictability of self, and so we're just recreating this limited world again and again.

When we start to discover this place of quiet and peace, we begin to open up to a much greater range of possibilities. Things can touch us more deeply, and we start to experience that there's a greater choice in how we respond to that situation, how we respond to life in that moment. This is the dawning of freedom. It has to do with this quality of openness that's not covered over with all the conceptual activity.

This is the pointer to the end of karma going on and on in its predictable patterns. As we find these openings through our meditation of peace, we start to see this unending flow of karma, which is wrapped up with self and the patterns and the self-view and the reinforcing of limits again and again. We can step out of that—or better to say, we don't step out of it. It is halted. That flow of becoming is halted. Then we are at peace with that original openness and vastness that is our nature, that is our birthright.

So this is the discovery. This is the unfolding. This is the release. That peace is not a constructed thing. That silence is not a constructed thing. It's what happens when we stop doing. When we stop doing, that peace is revealed.

We have come out of—I don't know if you remember from the opening night when I talked about the Buddha's quest—searching for something beyond birth and death, something beyond the constant law of change. This peace is beyond birth and death. This silence is beyond birth and death. This stopping is beyond birth and death. As we start to touch that in our meditation practice, we're beginning to get the glimmer of something that lets us step outside the endless cycles of birth and death. We step outside the round of becoming and find our place of ease in the deathless, in the unborn.

I mention this so that you can start to look for those periods of quiet. Now, I don't want to say that's the end of the journey. This peace is onward leading. It unfolds more and more, ultimately—the Buddha says—up to the fullness of liberation. But this is the entry point. Once we have this, we have the taste of the goal. Then we just need to keep walking until we reach it.

Thank you for your attention. We'll continue to develop this theme in further talks.

Let's just sit for a minute in quiet together.

A final word from the Buddha: "In my enlightenment, I discovered the unborn, unaging, unailing, undying, supreme security from bondage, nibbana."

Thank you for listening.

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