Formation of Self-View

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:12:26

So I want to start this session by exploring some of what you might have investigated during the guided meditation. We were looking at opening into a receptive awareness to bring a sense of peace and ease. And then what comes in that disturbs that? What's the nature of the disturbance and how does it feel?

Will, what did you notice?

"What I've been battling with is reflecting on all the things in life that I feel a great amount of guilt about. And it's very distracting. I hope you have a magic answer for me on how to become more present and not go there."

Thank you. Remorse over past actions is a big thing that comes up in silent retreats—regrets about little things, regrets about big things that we've done. And they tend to stay with us with some charge until, in my experience, we've given enough time to let the awareness come in contact with them and for us to feel the remorse that's coupled with the guilt.

We say that the guilt isn't so helpful because it adds an element of self-judgment, but it's important to feel the remorse. And it's hard to know how long it will take for that healing to take place, but we need to keep feeling the remorse part as long as it's coming up strongly.

And then the other side is, if there are times when we can simply say, "don't let the thoughts go down that road," and we can just bring them back and stay connected with something in the present, that's skillful. Sometimes something more active than just the experience of breath or body is helpful, such as loving kindness or compassion practice—a more active practice.

How did it feel in the body? What was the bodily experience?

"Tightness in the chest and kind of an uneasy feeling in the stomach."

Thanks. I'm feeling better about it now. This is something that's going to wear down. I guess we call that purification—just letting it wear down to where it has less of a charge. I still remember things that I did as a child that were unskillful, and I still feel some pain around them. My father took me out hunting when I was a kid, and so I learned to shoot birds with a shotgun. And when those memories come up, I still feel badly about them. But they don't weigh me down the way they did when I first started to recollect them.

So the disturbance manifested as contraction and unease in the stomach.

Patty, what did you notice?

"In that particular sit, I was interrupted by moments of spacious awareness and I was predominantly dealing with body pain and sensation. And it kept me very present-oriented. I mean, I stayed in the present, I watched the sensations change and every once in a while there'd be relief and then I could just be so grateful that I went into spacious awareness for a few minutes. But primarily it was hard to find the spacious awareness."

So the disturbance was around body pain and then there were times of relief. Was the relief because the pain went away or because there was a different mental relationship to it?

"I think it's because the pain went away because I was trying to be very kind to myself. I pretended it was somebody else's body pain and so I sent loving kindness to her and to it. It changed moment to moment. And when it changed to lessen, I could relax into that spaciousness. But for the most part, it was intense."

So intense body pain felt as a disturbance. Was there an emotional reaction to the body pain?

"There was yesterday when it was new."

Yesterday I had a hissy fit that I'm too young for this and I don't want this and this better not be the rest of my life. And I did that yesterday. And today I realized that wasn't useful.

"So was the emotional response to the pain this morning equanimous?"

"Pretty much so. I could find kindness pretty quickly. I was uncomfortable and kept saying, you know, unpleasant, unpleasant, unpleasant, but I wasn't getting all bent out of shape around it."

"Could it be said that you were, even though the pain was there and intense, you were somewhat at peace with it?"

"Intermittently."

"All right. Thank you. And then when there was the reaction to the pain, how did the body manifest? How did you feel that reaction in the body? Not the pain itself, but kind of the reaction to the pain."

"There was definitely a tightening in my brain. I mean, I felt a tension in my head."

"Yeah. Tightness and tension. Yeah. Thank you."

Let's take maybe one more. Anything anybody noticed about the center at the back?

"The image that kind of helps me with the spaciousness is not the sky but a big pool of water, so very, very wide boundaryless pool. And it's nice because a lot of the sounds don't disturb me because they kind of imagery of like raindrops falling in and just a little ripple in that, but it's still the water. When a big noise, it's kind of like a wave coming through, but it's still water. So that was lovely for me.

But what does disrupt me is thoughts. And I have thoughts all the time. I mean, it's just amazing how many

thoughts I have. And a couple of things I noticed. One is that the energetic feeling of it is almost as if the spacious water collects into a funnel up. You know, like everything goes up into my head, that's kind of logical, that's where thoughts would go, but I just notice, oh, I am totally in my head.

And the other thing I notice is that I like my thoughts. Not that they're all pleasant, but I mean, I like thinking. And that I feel more comfortable there than I feel in that spaciousness. The spaciousness makes me a little queasy after a couple of seconds. It's a little too vulnerable. And I'm very comfortable thinking. And so it feels like, oh, now I know where I am. So it's interesting to discover that I sort of take refuge in my thoughts from the vulnerability of that wide open spaciousness."

Thank you. So a couple of things to comment on in that description. I love the image of the pool, and actually it's one I've used in talks, and that the sense impressions are like drops of rain falling on the surface, just like ping, ping, ping. Every sense impression is like that. And I think Carl Jung used the lake, big body of water, as an image for consciousness. Or when that image comes in a dream, it symbolizes consciousness. So I think that's a very nice way to get into this natural peace and ease.

And then the comment that thoughts kind of come like a funnel rising up implies that the attention is taken off from the breadth of the lake and kind of concentrated, and you mentioned coming up into the head, and then the loving of the thinking. This unfortunately is the meditator's dilemma.

We love to think, we love to proliferate, and it gets us into trouble.

So what I wanted to draw out from the comments and what many of you probably experienced is that there can be this initial expansiveness, whether through the sky image or the lake image, and there's a quality of peace in that.

In that expansive awareness, what's the sense of I like? Big or small, relatively? In that expansive place, the sense of I is relatively small, isn't it? Kind of weak.

Then a disturbance comes and it implies some narrowing of focus. People mention tension, tightness, contraction, tension in the chest, the narrowing of thought energy. There's a coagulation of that broad energy into something small. This smallness brings a sense of tightness or constriction or limitation. And there's something reassuring in it. That's why we keep coming back to it.

What's the sense of I like when the thoughts and disturbances are causing that kind of contraction? Stronger, right? So the wide open attention—sense of I is not so strong. Disturbance comes along. The disturbance is mainly about me, right? Past actions or my pain or what I love to think about. Then with that sense of contraction and smallness, narrowing of focus, the sense of I goes up.

What we want to explore in this session is what this sense of I is all about and how it gets created. Sally spoke last night about how within all the field of our sense experience, or the five aggregates, there is really no self in that. She spoke very convincingly. I was convinced there's no self.

And yet here we are this morning—the self is coming up again. The I is establishing itself. We're believing it. We're feeling it in the body. It matters to us. So what is this interplay between this open state, which we've all touched and can recognize—there's no inherent I in this. In that open place you can see there's nothing stuck or fixed. There's no inherent self there. And then the narrowing and concentration of energy and the coagulation into self again. What is that dynamic all about?

The Buddha certainly pointed to this sense of self as one of the primary forms of our bondage, maybe the primary form of our bondage to suffering. The ignorance which is at the root of the chain of dependent origination is largely about not seeing this. The covering over of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self that Sally spoke about last night is an active force in the mind that blocks us from seeing things the way they are. That's how we get caught in this self-belief.

I also want to suggest, just by way of perspective, this is not a trivial or small problem. At the risk of sounding pretentious, I think it has cosmological implications. When you think about the creation myths that different cultures come up with, every culture has something to explain how all this got here.

In our day and age, there are a couple of predominant ones. One is the theistic creation myth—that before anything appeared, there was this God with a capital G, and God made all this. But those never explain how the God element got here. So they're not quite satisfying for someone who wants a more philosophical, intellectually nuanced solution.

The other creation myth popular in our culture is the scientific view. In the philosophical realm, I would call this the materialist view, which says that in the beginning there was the Big Bang. From a very small concentration of only matter, the matter exploded throughout, creating the expanding universe. After some billions of years, it collected enough into stars and then planets that life could form on a planet such as ours.

The estimate of the Big Bang, the most recent estimate, is 13.75 billion years ago. Then after 10 billion years of empty matter in space, on Earth at least, life started to emerge about 3.5 billion years ago in its most primitive form. The understanding is that it was just chemical reactions in pools of water, perhaps struck by lightning and fueled by a chemical-rich soup that allowed the first microbes or bacteria to form.

And from that humble, purely chemical beginning, more and more complex organisms evolved until one day there was intelligence. Exactly when that emergence occurred remains unclear, but the materialist explanation holds that intelligence—and we could say consciousness—was born out of dumb matter. Personally, I find it difficult to understand how unconscious matter can give rise to intelligence, yet this remains a prevailing cosmological view.

There is one other perspective I want to introduce—an Eastern religious view that likely originated in India, though I don't want to pin it down too precisely. This view proposes that in the beginning there was mind, not matter—mind. There existed some sort of elemental consciousness, and that was all there was

in the universe. Because there was nothing else, there wasn't really anything for that consciousness to know. There was no other object to be known, only perhaps this capacity for self-knowing. But there was some kind of intelligence there from the very beginning.

Then something within that unitary consciousness stirred and developed an appetite to experience other. It broke off from this primal unity of consciousness and became a separate knowing. Suddenly there was something to know. Out of this dance, mind created matter. Mind created the worlds that we encounter today. How fascinating—a creation myth that places mind at the center, mind at the beginning.

The Buddha didn't take sides with either view. In fact, he warned that anyone who speculates about the beginning of things will go mad and experience vexation. So we won't try to resolve these questions definitively, but we can observe that in some mysterious way, consciousness and this body have become joined.

In the Buddhist understanding, this consciousness will sever its connection to the body at death, and some form of it will continue into another birth. Some rippling effect will carry forward into another existence. But how did we arrive here in the first place? How did this individuality come to be? Somehow this sense of selfness is intimately tied up with our experience of individuality, yet the origins remain quite mysterious.

Again, the Buddha didn't declare whether mind or matter was primary. What he did teach is that body and consciousness lean against each other like two bundles of reeds that have been tied together. Imagine taking a bunch of reeds, tying them up, and setting one bundle on the ground. Then tie up another bundle, set it down, and lean them against each other. Body and consciousness support each other in precisely this way. Remove the body and consciousness collapses. Remove consciousness and the body collapses. He understood them as interdependent—not one based on the other, but mutually arising.

This is the mystery we want to explore: how selfhood and individuation happen, and how these two aspects of our existence relate to each other. Rumi captured this beautifully when he wrote, "Where did I come from? And what am I supposed to be doing here? I have no idea." That's essentially our situation.

We don't know where we came from, we don't know how we got here or why we're here, but at some point in the meditative journey we wake up and begin to examine our experience. What exactly is this human experience?

This inquiry is described on page five in the study guide. Today's topic is the formation of self-view, and quote number thirteen describes our fundamental situation. The Buddha is speaking to a group of monks and asks them, "Monks, what is the totality of life? Listen, attend carefully, and I will teach you the totality of life."

What a remarkable claim. Have you ever known any other thinker or speaker to make such an assertion? Einstein didn't attempt it. Freud didn't try. Marx didn't dare. Yet here is the Buddha, 2,500 years ago,

declaring: "It is simply the eye and sights, the ear and sounds, the nose and smells, the tongue and tastes, the body and sensations, the mind and mind objects. Anyone who claims to describe something beyond this as the totality of life would not be speaking of something they actually knew about."

You'll probably recognize this list.

These are the six internal and external sense bases. Sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and mind objects are the objects of the six senses. Eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind are the sense organs from which we experience the six kinds of sense appearances. The Buddha is saying that's all there is—these six senses and the appearances connected with each one. This is what our lives are based around.

I was at my first three-month course quite a few years ago, and one of my friends on that course was seized by the perplexity of this situation. She came up and grabbed Joseph Goldstein, who was teaching, grabbed him in the hallway of the lobby, and said, "Joseph, why are we here?" And Joseph said very calmly, as he always does, "Do you mean here on the retreat or here at all?" And she said, "Why are we here at all?" And he said, "Well, it's because you wanted to see and hear and smell and taste and touch."

In the Buddhist understanding, we basically take birth in order to satisfy this longing for sense contact, for sense desire. That's what it's all about, from one way of looking. Out of this desire, which the Buddha said has been going on for a very long time—this is a quotation from one of the texts—"Obstructed by ignorance and fettered by craving, beings have been wandering in this samsara since beginningless time, searching for sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch."

So here we are in this individual existence, and it turns out to be problematic. Unfortunately, it's not possible to keep pleasant experiences at those five sense doors coming all the time. We can't control it that well. From the Buddhist point of view, we're drawn to birth because of this longing, but we can't quite satisfy it because of that impermanence that Sally talked about last night. We find that being in a body, being separated out in consciousness, is problematic.

There's a wonderful Indian teacher—I don't know if you know him—Nisargadatta Maharaj. He's from the Advaita Vedanta tradition, and some of his dialogues were collected in this marvelous book called I Am That—highly recommended reading. This is an answer to a questioner. Maharaj said, "The desire for embodied existence is the root cause of trouble." The desire for embodied existence got us here, but it's the root cause of trouble.

Because once we're in a body, this sense contact is out of our control. We want things to be pleasurable, but they're not always. The body is very vulnerable. It's subject to pain, subject to illness, subject to aging, and subject to death. And in all the other senses, we can't keep the contacts always as we want them.

Moreover, this embodied existence gives rise in us to a sense of separateness. Because our bodies are separate, we believe in this separation as absolute and true and real, but it's not. Our bodies are separate, but our minds interpenetrate each other. Just like we pick up on each other's love and compassion, or we

pick up on each other's anger or sadness or frustration. We interpenetrate to the extent that I'm part of your experience right now and you're part of my experience. We could say that you're in me right now and I'm in you right now. So our bodies are separate and we believe that means we're separate, but that separation is only apparent. We're not finally separate from one another.

Researchers are studying many different things these days related to psychology and meditation. One of the things they're finding is that one of the deepest sources of human unhappiness is a sense of isolation. It makes us deeply unhappy. I think you could say the same for animals. If you take a herd animal or a pack animal and separate them from that natural gathering, it tends to make them neurotic or depressed. As community has fallen apart in the West, we feel that sense of isolation even more keenly, and I think it's a real problem in Western culture these days. It reinforces that sense of being separate.

So this individual existence, embodied existence, gives us a sense of separateness. Also, once we have a body, we have to take care of it. We have to feed it and clean it and protect it and defend it, keep it out of harm's way, out of the way of pain, injury, and death. That gives a sense of fear, a sense of worry and concern. And of course, underlying it all is the fear of dying. We all recognize from an early age that at some point this body will reach a natural end and our death is inevitable.

With this unexamined sense of separateness and the fear around the body, we kind of make a project. You could say this is the project of the self: keep the pleasant things coming as steadily as possible and keep the unpleasant things away. This is what human beings are basically concerned with. We can feel that in our meditation. The disturbances that come in meditation are basically about this problem.

How do I keep pleasure coming as continuously as possible? How do I keep pain away as permanently as possible? Because this is our main wish, it becomes a project that doesn't have an ending. Through investigation, through meditation, we realize that sense contact cannot be controlled.

This alternation, this rapid alternation of pleasant, unpleasant and neutral contact at the sense doors is simply our human condition. It was the Buddha's condition. His awakening didn't end this flow of sense data. You read in the texts places where he will say, "Ananda, you give the Dharma talk tonight. My back is paining me and I want to lie down." So the Buddha was also subject to these same frailties of the body and uncertainties of the body.

This constant search for pleasure and to ward off pain constitutes the ceaseless, unending project of the ego, the project of the self. When we grow up, we think this is the only way to live. We think this is natural, unavoidable. "I'm just human." It is human. But there is another way. As we see when we come into meditation, we start to discover we have some other choices.

What I want to point out is that this is not a slight disturbance or a slight problem. This is the human dilemma. What do we do with the vulnerability of separate embodied existence and being subject to pain and separation from pleasure that involves? That's our situation.

As we start to wake up to this, this sense of I, the separate being, starts to be felt as something of a burden. We have to look after it, we have to defend it, we have to feed it, we have to nourish it, we have to protect it. That's why Maharaj says in another quotation, "All yogas have only one aim, which is to save you from the calamity of separate existence." Believing ourselves to be separate is a kind of calamity because that's what involves us in all the struggle and all the turmoil.

As far as I can tell, it is only spiritual life that offers a way beyond seeing in this way. It is only spiritual life that offers a way out of the calamity of this apparent separateness. And it is only apparent. It's not ultimately true. It is true that our bodies are subject to uncertainty and pain, but it is not true that we're fundamentally separate or isolated or distant from one another.

We can see at times the truth in this lack of separation, the truth in the no abiding self at the center of everything, but the sense of self continues to come back, the sense of separateness. So let's take a closer look at that. We can search for this in our meditation, and I think meditators need to search to find where this self is.

William James, the philosopher, said, "When I search for myself, all I can find is a tickle at the back of my throat." He was lucky. Buddhists often find less. The Dalai Lama said, "When something seems very clear to you, but you go to look for it and you can't find it, that's a sure sign of delusion."

The self seems so obvious, doesn't it? Of course there's an I. But when we look for it, we can't find that thing. Some of the confusion around self is easily seen in our language. If I ask you, "How tall are you?" That's easy to answer, right? It's not a trick question. I'd say I'm 5'10". In answering "I'm 5'10"," which everybody would accept as a commonly true statement, no problem, what I'm really saying is my body is 5 feet 10 inches tall. I'm not talking about my thoughts. I'm not talking about my emotions. I'm talking about this body. So here I'm identifying I with the body. I am the body and I'm 5'10".

But I could also ask you, "What color are your eyes?" And I would say, "My eyes are brown." Oh, now I'm someone who owns eyes. Now I'm not saying I am the eye. I'm not saying I'm brown. My eyes are brown.

So there's someone who stands apart from the body who owns it. Are you the body? Or are you the person who stands apart, who's the owner of the body? You can't really be both, can you? How many selves do you have?

We can do the same with emotions. We talk about "I'm happy" or "I'm sad" and then we're identifying ourselves with an emotion, an object of mind. Or at other times we'll talk about "my joys and my sorrows." And then we identify ourselves with the owner of our emotions. So we could be the body, we could be the emotions, we could be the owner of the body or the owner of the emotions.

Or as Sally indicated last night, one of the most common and deep-rooted ways we take ourselves is that I live behind my eyes in the center of my head. And I look out at the world through this command and control center. And that's who I really am—this observer that's somewhere in the center of the head. And

that eye is the one that experiences all the things at the six sense doors.

I did a lot of retreats in the style of U Ba Khin as taught by S.N. Goenka and Robert Hover and other teachers. One of the great things about that practice is that you are encouraged to place your attention in absolutely every corner of the body and explore it through this practice of sweeping. So I spent a lot of time putting my attention in this area behind my eyes and between the ears, never found a self there. But it was a really useful exploration because I went through every bit internally and on the surface. I couldn't find the eye anywhere, although it felt like it was somewhere. But I looked for it and couldn't find it anywhere. So I think in meditation it's helpful that we try that, that we look to convince ourselves it's not lurking there somewhere in one of those corners.

How does this sense of self come about? How does it arise? Let's look at quotation number 20, also on page 5 of the study guide. The term being used here, personality view, is a translation of the Pali sakāya-diṭṭhi. And it basically means the belief in personhood, personness, the belief in an ongoing self.

The Buddha replies: "Here bhikkhus, an untaught ordinary person regards material form as self or self as possessed of material form or material form as in self or self as in material form. He regards feeling, perceptions, formations, consciousness likewise. That is how personality view comes to be."

So what the Buddha is describing is that we take an aspect of our experience—and here he's singling out material form, rūpa, the first of the five aggregates—and we're identifying with it in some way. That is, we're claiming a self based on the relationship to form, or let's say, this body.

This is a little bit dense and a little hard to penetrate at first. Let's just go through these. He offers four ways that we create this identification with regard to, let's say, body.

The first is we regard body as self. Do we do that? Yes. "I'm 5'10"," and we believe it. I am 5 feet 10 inches tall. We regard body as I.

Or self is possessed of body. Do we ever say, "This is my body"? Often. "My eyes are brown."

Or material form as in self. Now this is a little different. When we did the meditation this morning and you were invited to open the awareness wide, to take in all the sounds that were coming and going and the sensations that were coming and going, could you imagine yourself identifying with that awareness and saying, "That's who I really am"? I'm really that wide open awareness in which everything is happening. Could you imagine?

So if you say self is this big awareness, is body located within self? Yes. So this is the sense one regards body as in self. We identify with the awareness, and then we think the body is in that self, which is truly me. The awareness is truly me, but the body is within that.

So regards material form as in self, or self as in material form.

So this is the eye that's behind the eyes and between the ears—that's where I really am, in the center of the head. So these are four ways in which we commonly create a sense of I based on a relationship to the body. This is what we do all the time, and it's not correct.

If you look at quote 19, just above that, the Buddha says, "In whatever way they conceive of self, the truth is ever other than that." Note that "of self" is in brackets—it doesn't appear in the Pali in the original text, but this word "conceive" is usually used in the text to refer to this conceiving about oneself. It's the same root as the word "conceit," which is one of the ten fetters and one of the last five fetters to go. It only goes at full awakening. *Māna* is the Pali.

So this sense of conceit and conceiving in this context is about conceiving about ourselves, conceiving about a self. In whatever way they conceive of self, the truth is ever other than that. One of my teachers put it more directly. He said, "Everything you think is wrong"—where self is involved, at least.

I want to draw out one other thing about what we ascribe to self, and why it's injurious to regard any of these things as self. There's something we don't talk about a lot, but when we conceive of a self, there are a few assumptions that are bound up in that. Or you could say a few assumptions that are bound up in the notion of I.

The main one is continuity over time. If you truly can see this body and mind as arising, passing, arising, passing, arising, passing, moment by moment—as Sally described in the talk last night, as the true teaching of impermanence—nothing is lasting even over more than a moment. Then you would feel yourself being born and dying, being born and dying, if you took yourself to be this. But we don't feel like we're being born and dying, being born and dying, moment by moment. Generally, we feel we're continuing and sensations are coming and going, sounds, etc.

So there's implicit in this idea of I or self—there's a commitment to continuity or, you could say, some permanence. If that commitment, belief in continuity were not there, we wouldn't be afraid of dying, the true physical death that's at the end of this life. The reason we fear that physical death is because, for most of us, it means the end of this thing we call I. That's what's threatening.

So one of the assumptions about self is there's a belief in continuity or permanence. Another of the assumptions is that there's a belief in control. As Sally read last night, "If form were mine, I should be able to say to it, 'Form, be like this.'" So I should be able to control what is mine, what is myself. But we can't.

And the last one I'll mention is that the self is really considered to be unitary or just one thing. People who believe they have multiple selves are usually medicated. So for most of us, it means we believe there is only one self. And that plays an important role. If you say, "Well, yeah, but I am the owner and I'm the body and I'm the thoughts and I'm the emotions and I'm my liver and I'm compassion and the experiencer of sounds," that's being multiple selves. Liver is not the same thing as compassion. If you want to be the liver, you can't really be compassion. Maybe your liver has compassion, but you can't be it. So we have to

find out where that one self is to be found, if it is to be found.

The Buddha put it this way—this is actually going back on page three, but it's one of my favorite quotes from the canon. It's quote number 11, just at the beginning of the quotation: "Venerable Ananda went to the Blessed One and on arrival, having bowed down to him, sat to one side. As he was sitting there, he said to the Blessed One, '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 of anything pertaining to a self. Thus it is said, Ananda, that the world is empty. And what is empty of a self or anything pertaining to a self?' And then he goes through the six sense doors."

In other translations, I've seen this said, "The world is empty insofar as empty of a self or anything belonging to a self." So that undercuts the notion of I or mine, that a self can possess anything. Basically what the Buddha is saying is that when we say I or mine in relationship to the experience of our senses, we're falling into delusion.

We're not seeing things the way they are. And at the same time, it seems to be here. So how can we look into this? We've come to understand the self isn't necessarily inherently there in every moment. We experience sometimes when it's quite weak, other times when it's quite strong. How does it get brought into being? How does it reappear after going relatively quiet for a while? How does it come back into being?

On page five, quotes 14 and 15 talk about this to some extent. Quote 14 is one of the more famous quotes from the Pali Canon where the Buddha says—it puts the Dharma in one pith statement: "Nothing whatsoever is to be clung to." The Pali being *Sabe, Dama, Nalam, Abhinivesaya*. Nothing whatsoever is to be clung to. And it's not included here, but after that he says, "One who has heard this has heard all the dharmas. One who has practiced this has practiced all the dharmas. One who has understood this has understood all the dharmas." This is really it. Nothing whatsoever is to be clung to.

And then Ajahn Buddhadasa, one of our Thai forest teachers no longer living, put it this way in quote 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. As being I refers to the feeling called I-ing, *ahankara,* the grasping at a soul or abiding ego entity. As being mine refers to the feeling called my-ing, *mamankara*, the grasping at phenomena as being connected to ego."

I love this statement. It connects grasping with the formation of I and mine. It talks about the forming of I and mine as verbs. I-ing and my-ing. This is really an important understanding. As Sally said, we can't get rid of the self because there's no self there to be found and gotten rid of. But the truth is we create self again and again and again through the activities of I-ing and my-ing, *ahankara* and *mamankara*. In our meditation, we can start to see this. We can slow down the process of creation enough that we can start to

see it happening.

Just one more thing to pull out from quotes 14 and 15: basically, the I-ing and my-ing happen because of grasping. When we grasp at something as being I or when we grasp at something as being mine, it's only clinging that establishes the sense of self. And in fact, you could say that selfing and clinging are synonymous.

So in the middle of this vast open space, natural peace and ease, something comes along that has some kind of connective fuel of greed, hatred, or delusion. We grab hold. There is grabbing hold of it—not *I* grab hold of it. There is grabbing hold of it, fueled by these underlying forces. And that grasping is what creates a sense of self. Nothing else. We can start to see that happen.

In quote 16, the Buddha describes this process as well. "Whether I teach the Dhamma briefly or at length, those who understand it are hard to find." Isn't this poignant? To me this is one of the most poignant teachings in the whole of his dispensation. You can almost feel the disappointment—not necessarily suffering, but some disappointment there. And he's with Sariputta, one of his two chief disciples.

Then Sariputta says, "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." Sariputta is the cheerleader. "Come on, Buddha, you can do it again. Somebody will get it."

So the Buddha replies, "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. Let there be no self-centered imaginings of I and mine and no such bias.

This formation of I and clinging to I is a bias in the world. It treats this embodied existence as more important than that embodied existence, and it continues to reinforce the fuels of greed, aversion, and delusion.

So in our meditation, this stilling of the mind that happens to some degree in meditation retreats is so important because it gives us a background—a state of receptive, relaxed attention from which the uprising of the clinging of I can be seen clearly.

In daily life, for the untaught ordinary person who hasn't been exposed to meditation or these teachings, I is being regenerated on such a continuous basis, so frequently and with such strength and conviction, that it's very hard to tease it apart. This teasing apart really relies on coming into a meditative frame of mind where the pace of grasping and the pace of thinking has settled enough that we can start to look from a foundation of some steadiness of attention, calm, or peace.

From that place, we can see the clinging happen and the uprising of I and mine as an experiential activity,

a volitional activity—something that is coming from an internal will or urge. Then we really see that the I is not intrinsic. It's not steady and ongoing. It quiets down for a while, and then it rises up through our own volition. And then it settles down again, and then it rises up through our own volition.

We become familiar with how the times of peace have a certain subtle satisfactoriness in them. It's not big bells and whistles like pleasant sensory contact, but there is a satisfying, nourishing, contentment-leading subtle experience in the state of calm and peace. Of course we love the fireworks of our thoughts and the sense contact and all that too, but over time one does develop a taste for this quality of peace and non-entanglement.

And then we see the I arise again with clinging. So this is interesting to investigate. Does the I ever arise without taking hold of some facet of our sense experience? Or is it always my knee pain, my back pain, my sadness, my home, my relationship—always defining itself in relation to something else? Do you ever sit there and the I just goes "me"? It doesn't usually happen. It's usually by taking hold of something else.

So it is conditionally arisen, dependently arisen out of this factor of grasping to something else. And that's all it is. It's just coming out of taking hold of different parts of our experience. We could call it grasping. We could call it clinging. We usually use grasping for the act in the present moment, the new taking hold. And we use clinging to refer to something that has been grasped and which grasping is continuing. But it's the same word in Pali—upādāna.

How can we start to let go of some of this movement of I-ing and my-ing in the sense of bondage and separation and fear and greed that it conditions? When we come into meditation, as I mentioned, usually our thoughts are going so quickly, grasping is going so quickly, the self is being recreated so quickly, we can't see anything else. But as the thoughts slow down and as the movements of mind slow down, we start to open up some space.

Such an important, valuable discovery in meditation—I think Gil referred to this yesterday. We start to experience a space between two thoughts. One thought has ended and there's a pause before the next thought begins. What's the quality of that space like? What does that feel like? Usually that quality is a quality of non-suffering. It has a quality of some kind of peacefulness, non-disturbance.

This can be a meditation. Can we start to tune in to the quality of the experience of that space between two thoughts? And as we do, it tends to open up more. As we arrive there, as we connect with it, as we learn to rest there, that space tends to open.

This place also has a sense of equanimity. There's a feeling of perhaps a gathering of strength through resting in that place. Because it leads in the direction of contentment, of non-disturbance, there's a sense of a gathering of the strength of the mind so that when the next contact comes, even if it is unpleasant, there's not much of an aversive reaction. And if it is pleasant, there's not much of a greedy reaction.

So we start to find by resting in this place some kind of balance. This balance, which we often call

equanimity, is one of the highest factors of the mundane factors of mind that are developed through meditation.

It's the seventh of the enlightenment factors, the fourth of the Brahmaviharas, mentioned again and again throughout the teachings. This equanimity, I believe, is one of the most durable qualities when one leaves retreat and returns home. It's often what people report in making the transition back into daily life.

"You know, my concentration was shot by the second day of meditating at home. I didn't have that kind of peace. The loving-kindness wasn't quite as rich as it was. But you know what? It was okay. I had a lot more space around all the things that were going on in my life."

That's equanimity, and we can cultivate it by discovering this space between thoughts, leading in the direction of peace. Peace, calm, equanimity—these are all important factors to develop. But the most important is how we understand differently, how we see differently. That's the development of wisdom.

Let's continue with quote number 20. The Buddha had been discussing how personality view arises through identification with the five aggregates. He's then asked: "Well, Venerable Sir, how does one know, how does one see, so that in regard to this body with its consciousness, there is no I-making, mine-making, and underlying tendency to conceit?"

"Bhikkhu, any kind of material form whatever, one sees it all as it actually is with proper wisdom thus: 'This is not mine. This I am not. This is not myself.'"

This is the activity of wisdom. We come to understand that these arisings, even though we may have clung to them and formed some immediate notion of self, it's not really true. It's not mine. I am not this. This is not myself.

The commentaries say that these three phrases point to three important underlying tendencies of mind. "This is not mine"—or rather, its opposite, "This is mine"—is the outcome of tanha or craving, a form of wanting or greed. "This I am not"—or its opposite, "This I am"—is an expression of mana, defining oneself to be something or other. "This is not myself"—or its opposite, "This is myself"—is an expression of sakkayaditthi, or simply ditthi. These three short phrases are said to be expressions of tanha, mana, and ditthi—craving, conceit, and views—summed up very briefly here.

The Buddha continues: "Seeing thus, a well-taught noble disciple becomes disenchanted with material form, disenchanted with feeling, with perception, formations, and consciousness. Being disenchanted, one becomes dispassionate. Through dispassion, one's mind is liberated. When it is liberated, there comes the knowledge it is liberated. One understands: birth is destroyed, the holy life has been lived, what had to be done has been done, there is no more coming to any state of being."

Now while this discourse was being spoken, through not clinging, the minds of sixty bhikkhus were liberated from the taints. The Buddha had something.

I'll end this session with the last few quotes on this page. "Whatever be the phenomena 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 nibbana."

This final quote is 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, just an invitation. In your meditations, please pay attention to the space, the natural peace and ease, and then how the self gets formed in grasping and disturbance out of that.

These are profound questions that really get to the heart of practice. When we work with concepts like anatta alongside teachings on karma, it can feel like we're holding two seemingly contradictory truths.

Let me address the question about remorse first. Remorse may indeed be triggered by thoughts of "I" connected to a memory of past action. The way it typically unfolds is that a memory arises in the present moment, and there could be a sense of remorse or guilt—though these are slightly different experiences.

Remorse can actually be felt without a lot of I-ing and my-ing when it arises from recognition and understanding of karma. Yes, in a way it was this mind-body that performed that earlier action, but we also recognize it's an entirely different mind-body now. However, the karma from those earlier events continues through this mind-body continuum. We'll explore karma more deeply later in the retreat, but it's closely connected to what you're asking.

There is no one who receives the fruits of karma, as pointed out in that beautiful Visuddhimagga quotation, and yet the results of my actions don't land on you—they land here. Karma is a fascinating phenomenon to explore in relation to understanding that there's no abiding self, and yet there is continuity in the mind-body process.

So a memory can arise from the past, remorse can be felt, and remorse doesn't have to be a quality of suffering. This is why I was trying to distinguish it from guilt. With guilt there is suffering. Remorse can be an honest acknowledgment that something was a mistake, without a strong sense of self but with recognition that "I am the owner of my karma."

Regarding the five daily recollections—"I am of the nature to age, I am of the nature to get sick, to die, to be separated"—and why the last one, "I am the owner of my actions," seems different from the others, this touches on dependent origination as well.

The first four recollections are indeed about relinquishment, recognizing impermanence. But the reflection on karma serves a different purpose. It's really helpful for reminding us to be very careful with our actions and not break the precepts we've undertaken. When there's a breaking of a precept, then there's ground for remorse or guilt, confusion of mind, and so on. The importance of that reflection in this

sequence is to encourage us to be really careful moment by moment, because we are always acting in body, speech, or mind. Karma is being generated at every moment. It's an encouragement to keep our actions really wholesome as we practice.

There's something else important to say about those reflections. The Buddha used reflections like this—"I am of the nature to age"—many, many times without being concerned about the apparent contradiction of using "I" while teaching that there is no fixed self. He said it's fine to use these words conventionally, understanding that this mind and body do form a continuum. It's just that every element of it is constantly changing. There's nothing fixed, no abiding element that has continuity within it.

But the continuum—which is the conventional sense of a being, you could say the conventional sense of a self—does go on. It's the recognition that due to impermanence, that will change. Perhaps it would be clearer to say "this body is of the nature to age," or "this mind and body will be separated," or we can simply understand that the word "I," used conventionally, refers to this ever-changing process.

Somebody asked this question in most metta retreats: How can you say, may I be happy, when there is no I to begin with? So I have a metta phrase that corresponds with the Vipassana understanding, which you're welcome to use if you prefer.

You could say, "may I be happy," or "may Sally be happy." Or you could say, "in this ever-changing stream of physical and mental phenomena, conventionally designated as Sally, may the mind state of happiness arise ever more frequently." You could use either one. They're both fine. I find it a little easier to just say, "may Sally be happy." But it means the same. Same meaning.

One more question on the aisle.

Thank you. I actually, there's many things you talked about and I've got many confusions, but two which I just wanted to focus on. One is you proved to me that if I go looking for a self, I won't find it. And I feel if I go looking for consciousness, I won't find it. So why is it reasonable to believe that consciousness goes on? That's number one. And number two, without the self, where's the free will coming from? If everything is a process of karmic causes and conditions that are going on, how does free will arise and where does that come from? Those are just two of my confusions.

Great. Two good questions. I think you've been over some of this material before. So the first question about consciousness—his comment is he can't find the self and he also can't find consciousness. It's true in a way, and yet there's another way that we are able to know that we're conscious, and that knowing that we're conscious is some kind of finding. So it's not finding consciousness as an object, like we would find the breath or a body sensation or even emotion, but do you have any doubt that you're conscious?

Yes.

Okay. So generally we know that we're conscious, but we have a little trouble pinpointing exactly where it

is or how it can be found. So I prefer to think of consciousness as an activity rather than an object. So if we think of it as the activity of knowing, then I get some sense—oh yeah, knowing is happening. I get that. I can't quite put my hand around it, but knowing is happening. And so that's enough to work with. So that knowing activity, the Buddha said, may be able to continue after the body dies.

And the second question about free will is a very interesting one, too. The Buddha didn't come down on the side, I would say, of free will or determinism as a philosophical outcome. But he did come down against determinism. And he said, if one takes up a view—he called it fatalism—that everything is preordained and you don't have any choice or control about its direction, then one will not make effort. So he rejected determinism on the very pragmatic ground that if you believe it, you won't be motivated to take up the Eightfold Path, of which effort is one of the key spokes. So determinism was rejected.

Free will he didn't describe exactly. But certainly as we come to more understanding of karma and where volitional activities come from, we see how strongly conditioned our actions are—actions of body, speech and mind. And it certainly puts some question around the concept of free will. However, we can't toss it out because that tosses out effort.

So what I will say is that there is a factor in the mind called volition, which is the decider. Remember George W. Bush's famous comment, "I am the decider." We often—ego often thinks that. I'm the decider. In fact, volition is the element in the mind responsible for motivating actions, and you could say for making those choices. And volition is another impersonal—that means non-self—but highly conditioned element within the mental factors.

So volition can be influenced by wisdom, by love, by compassion, or volition can be influenced by desire, by aversion, by confusion, in different ways. So volition acts and is in that way a deciding factor, but it's conditioned by the elements, the qualities of mind that are present at the moment of acting.

And as someone on the path, it's best to act as though you have free will. It works. It works to act as though you have free will to cultivate the path factors. Even though, as we see, our will is not totally free. Like, you could come down and say, "I want to be effortlessly present with the breath for 45 minutes." But we don't usually have the will to make that happen. But it's best to act as though you have free choice and the path can unfold.

The path unfolds through our willingness to engage with it, even within the constraints of conditioned existence.

Okay, thank you. Unfortunately, I think we're out of time at this point for this session. So right now we move into interviews. I hope you've checked—some of you will be seeing Sally or Gil or myself at this time in a small group interview.

One word about the interviews: we want them to be discussions as you continue exploring these teachings in your practice.

Thank you for listening.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.