Self and Proliferation

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:01:09

I want to start from the theme that Heather talked about the other night, which is how we go on and on with our thoughts based on some kind of non-acceptance of the basic situation that we find ourselves in and how we can put a period to that—not do that any more than needed.

Tonight I just want to look a little more deeply into the dynamics of that situation of running on with our thinking and what's involved. Because I think that it's closely related to our sense of a self.

You know, the Buddha said that the sense of an I is not intrinsic to our experience as a human being in a body, but rather it's something we construct and create out of our own thoughts and views and beliefs. And that when we strongly affirm and believe in this sense of self, it constitutes a kind of bondage.

And you can feel this in a moment-to-moment way in your practice. We've probably all touched to some extent an experience where we realize that our nature includes this vast awareness, limitless awareness, that can be filled with a sense of boundless loving kindness directed to all beings. But how often do we live there? And what takes us out of that boundlessness? Something keeps shrinking the consciousness back in and closing us up in some kind of contraction.

And when we look at this, what creates this contraction, it's usually around some sense of I and me and mine and some concern about self. So we can take a look at this dynamic—the times in the day when we're open in this very unbounded way, and then the ways that we feel that narrowing and constriction due to the interests of self. What's going on with that?

And I think that when we start to look at this dynamic closely, we'll see that we generate this small sense of self again and again and again. It's not intrinsic to our momentary experience, but we recreate it over and over with pretty predictable ways of thinking and feeling. Each of us has our own particular patterns and tendencies of our personality, but we each have some that generate this small sense of self in rather expectable ways again and again.

So I want to look a little bit tonight at how that sense of self gets built up and constructed and what keeps it going.

In one way, the Buddha's description of our situation in that constriction is very simple. Here's one quotation: "Nothing whatever is worth clinging to. One who has heard this has heard all the dharmas. One who has practiced this has practiced all the dharmas." Sounds simple, right?

Or the second and third noble truths: The cause of suffering is craving. The end of suffering is the end of

craving. Wow, that's just craving and clinging. That's all I have to deal with.

But it's complicated because these operate on so many subtle levels and layers and get into every facet of our life and our personality and our heart and our mind and our body and our relationships and our work and everything that it generates quite a tangle. The Buddha talked about this again and again—the tangle that has to be unraveled for us to come to freedom.

So the mechanisms of our suffering are actually quite complex. And yet we have the ability through meditation to understand them and to see them. All the Buddha's basic teachings are pointing to this tangle and the threads that make it up.

So if you look into the Four Noble Truths, dependent origination, karma, not-self, becoming, the five aggregates, the end of karma and nibbana, they're all about this central dilemma of how we keep constricting through this sense of self and how we can open and release into the space of freedom. So all these basic teachings are connected.

So I'm going to talk about a number of them tonight as we explore this formation.

I want to start with something that Heather talked about, about how active our minds are when we find ourselves in retreat. Probably most of us have come out of pretty busy lives. I've heard a number of reports in the first days about people being tired because life was so busy and catching up on sleep and feeling exhausted. And that's normal for early days of the retreat.

So most of us come out of pretty busy lives and we come here. And then all of a sudden, all that doing and planning and creating and constructing isn't needed anymore. Right? Does the mind know that? Just because the outer activity stops, does the mind stop? Not usually.

Along with the reports of sleepiness, the most common other hindrance reported is restlessness. Restlessness. So in between the periods of fatigue and sleepiness, the mind is sort of going at quite a high rate. You know, probably pretty similar to the way it was going when we were out in our life last week. Things are starting to slow down now—I'm hearing this in the interviews also—but it's taken a while.

So we come into this situation where we can drop our outer doing, but there's this momentum built up in our mental activity and in thinking and planning and so forth that doesn't stop, even though it's no longer needed, even though it's no longer necessary. Why is that? Why can't we just say, mind quiet down? I don't need you right now.

Let me just sit here peacefully and enjoy my meditation. Why does this engine keep on running and running and running?

There seems to be some momentum there, and I think that momentum is not just random or accidental. I think there are deep forces in the heart and mind that are driving it. So we want to look into that.

Now, I'm not suggesting that your goal in meditation should be to stop all thoughts. First, it's not possible. Second, it's not necessary. So please don't interpret this as saying no thought should arise for a good meditator. That's not what I'm saying.

But there's a difference between a thought arising, being seen and let go of, and plunging into the swirl of mental activity, taking hold of it, engaging and furthering it. That's the activity that we don't need to do. We don't need to keep energizing those thoughts and driving them forward and buying into the storm that they create. That's a level of doing that isn't necessary.

So thought can arise, pass away—no problem. No problem for a meditator. But this active engagement in the thinking process based on past and future causes us to lose our mindfulness. We get lost in the created fiction of that conceptual world. And so this is what we want to look into. Where is this coming from? And is it necessary, or is it possible to stop that kind of doing, that level of activity?

This stopping of doing activity—or you could call it non-doing—is quite a high value in Buddhism and in meditation. This is something that we want to explore. Of course, we need to do in daily life, physically. How much we need to think about it ahead of time is a matter for some refinement. But here in meditation, we don't need to do a whole lot. When you're sitting on the cushion, when you're walking back and forth, not much thinking is needed to do that. And so is it possible to find some non-doing in these simple activities? And if we can, there's a real sense of freedom in it.

Some of my friendships in the Dharma go back quite a few years. In my early days at IMS, I was on staff there for a couple of years with good friends like Carol Wilson and Rodney Smith and Steve Armstrong. In those early years, we were doing a staff retreat. We took a two-week period and the staff went into retreat while other people cooked for us. One year, Steve exercised some of his free time to create this brochure for IMS—a parody kind of brochure.

The symbol on the front of it was a Dharma wheel with eight spokes. It said "Insight Meditation Society" and advertised the advantages of coming on retreat: "No talking, no swimming, no eating afternoon, no golf and no tennis." It said, "The vacation of your dreams!" in that style. But what I remember best about it was the motto on the front cover of the brochure, where Steve said, "It's better to do nothing than to waste time."

So this is kind of our goal as meditators—to do nothing. And it's not as easy as it sounds. We can stop doing with our body, but we keep doing with our minds. So what would it mean to stop doing with our minds?

Just as an indication of the value of this, I want to mention a young Tibetan Lama who I've met and practiced with a couple of times named Mingyur Rinpoche. I think he's now about thirty-six years old. A few years ago, he was in the midst of building a very large worldwide organization. He had a center in the U.S. based in Minneapolis, a center in Asia based in Hong Kong. He has in Asia several monasteries, hundreds of monks and nuns, lay students across Asia, and thousands of students here in America and

Europe. He's a very respected young Lama.

He did his first three-year retreat at age thirteen. At that age, he felt a strong draw toward meditation. He asked his father for approval—his father was a famous Tibetan Lama also—and received his approval.

So Mingyur Rinpoche went into retreat at age 13. He completed that retreat and at age 16 he said, "It's not enough. I want to do another." So he signed up for another three-year retreat at age 16. About a year into that retreat, the head teacher, the retreat master, died. What were they going to do? Cancel the three-year retreat, or find another leader?

One of the heads of his lineage, a very senior monk, said, "We'll pick a new retreat master, and it will be Mingyur Rinpoche"—who was 17 years old at that time. That's the kind of background and stature he has within the Tibetan community—highly respected from a very young age.

After he finished his retreat practice, he went into something like nine years of formal monastic studies, developing a very deep philosophical training as well. He has a broad vision for bringing meditation into the world in the West and Asia, not only through monasteries but to lay people. He has active programs in education and hospitals and a great vision of outreach.

Through his personal magnetism, he had attracted many students and created two large organizations. They were flourishing with retreats and teachings and books and videotapes. This was all in full swing when he announced, "I want to do another three-year retreat."

His students and administrators were very supportive because they know how much practice means to him. They prepared to cover all the activities of the organizations while he went away for three years. About a year and a half ago, he took off for another three-year retreat. As far as I know, no one I know has seen him since. He's wandering somewhere between India and Nepal and maybe Kashmir, practicing in remote mountain hermitages.

Why would a young, budding lama, growing in stature internationally, leave all his worldly activities like that? Because the value of stopping is so important. The value of retiring into seclusion—which you all have here—to do that inner work of ceasing and developing the mind and heart. It was such a strong draw, he left all that aside for three years.

This quality of non-doing is very highly regarded in all the Buddhist traditions. In appreciation of it, we want to look into the energy behind our own doing. What is it that drives all this mental activity? Is all this activity of the mind just a random vestige, like an appendix that doesn't mean much anymore? Or is there something significant going on? Is there some deeper fuel for this engine?

I want to suggest that there is. I think it's quite significant, all this activity.

The way I see the situation is that all of us at some point in the past have had a glimpse of the underlying uncertainty of human life, of all sentient life. We've seen the nature of change, the light or empty nature of

the world and our senses. We've intuited on some level that there's nothing very reliable there that we can take hold of and hold onto. The world isn't solid in the way that we often assume it to be. I think we all know that on some level.

As a defense against seeing that deep nature of change and the lack of solidity and substance outwardly, I think we've all tried to create it inwardly by constructing a solid sense of self. If we have a sense that there's an "I" somewhere in here that goes on and on over time, that seems to provide some continuity that the outside world can't offer. This tries to create a sense of security that we haven't been able to find externally.

I think we have all constructed what we hope will be an inner refuge against the incessant waves of change that life presents—through some sense of ongoing identity, a continuing sense of self or "I."

Let's take a look at some of the details. How would one go about constructing such a thing? How would one feed a self like that?

Well, one of the things we notice is the "I" likes pleasure and doesn't like pain. So one of the ways we can feed it is to keep giving it pleasure and keep the pain away. Then this "I" seems to be somewhat safe. But how reliable is that strategy? Can you always do that? Of course not. We can't always do it, but we keep trying.

So we keep looking to adjust what life is presenting to us to keep this self fed and secure. We have three main strategies for doing it, which the Buddha pointed to again and again and again. The first strategy is the force of desire.

The word that's often used in translation is greed. It's a translation of the Pali word *lobha*. And that is the tendency of mind that keeps trying to get pleasure coming our way.

The second tendency is called aversion or *dosa* in Pali. It expresses itself in two ways. There's an aggressive form of *dosa*, which pushes away the unpleasant. And there's an avoidance form of *dosa* which shrinks from the unpleasant. One might be called anger, one might be called fear. So together those are our ways, our strategies for separating ourselves from the unpleasant.

And the third piece that's needed to keep the rest in place is not looking at it too closely. And this is the operation of delusion or in Pali, *moha*. Because if we look too closely at what we were doing, we would see it doesn't really work and it doesn't make sense. And that would undermine the whole project of self.

So these three things go together. The Buddha called these the three *kilesas*, roots of the unwholesome: greed, aversion, and delusion. And together they constitute the enterprise of self. And they underlie all this unconscious doing that we keep engaging in again and again and again.

So this doing is not just an accidental or random thing, but it's an outgrowth of these very deep forces connected with our search for security. But this search for security inwardly, through feeding the self,

through constructing an ongoing self, also isn't truly successful. Because the inner landscape is changing also and we can't control the outer. But we keep trying because we haven't really examined the nature of our activity. We haven't examined these movements of greed, aversion and delusion. So we keep trying to fix life. Again and again and again, make it a little bit better.

So the Tibetans have a saying that the essence of *samsara*, which is this endless cycle of taking birth and dying—which can be understood on a life, death, rebirth, and a new life level, or can be understood as the creation of a new self moment to moment. Either way you want to understand *samsara* is fine. The essence of *samsara* is trying to correct. We keep trying to fix life, to align with this project of self.

So it's why our sittings aren't always so peaceful. You know, we want the body to feel a little more comfortable, or we want to push away the pain that's come into the shoulder. Or we want to recapture that peaceful sitting that we had earlier in the day. Or we want to feel again this really beautiful loving kindness that we had for our benefactor. Or we don't want to feel some fear or anxiety that's surfacing in the moment. And so we keep trying to make things just a little better, just a little better. We keep fussing with and tinkering with our basic experience moment after moment after moment. And all that doing, based on greed, aversion, delusion, blocks the sense of peace. We don't know how to stop it, because this project has such deep roots and we've put so much into it, it keeps going from a lot of momentum.

This ongoing activity we're engaged in comes from a deep motivation. And because the factor of motivation is there, it connects with the Buddha's teaching on *karma*. *Karma* just means action out of a motivation, out of an intention. And the compulsive nature of these activities is born from the intentions of greed, aversion, and delusion.

And when we look at them closely, we'll see that all these thoughts that keep running, running, running, running, running are mostly about I, me and mine. And they're not always so important. You know, we can get quite involved with really minor thoughts and then we can neglect sort of other big areas. Did you spend very much time today worrying about the global economy? Or the unemployment rate, which is currently at 7.9% in the United States? Or the 5 million people who are about to have their homes foreclosed because of the banking crisis of a few years ago? I mean, those issues are a bit larger than most of the concerns we go on and on about. But we go on and on about them because they're my concerns. So this is kind of the nature of our inner dialogue. When we stop and slow down physically, we start to hear it.

Ajahn Amaro kind of captured this contrast in a really beautiful talk title. He gave a talk on becoming, and it was subtitled, "Why Public Speaking is More Terrifying Than Worldwide Nuclear Destruction." Because it's about me.

So we have this dilemma. I mean, it really is, it's our existential dilemma as people. There is this underlying openness in existence.

And part of that openness is a lack of permanence, a lack of solidity. And yet we have this quest for security. The human heart is not happy in lack of security and has this deep urge to find it.

And just a postscript while we're on this topic: the Buddha considered that his path led to true security. So it's not the case that there is no security in life, but there is no security in the changing elements of conditioned existence. This hunger for security is answered through the fulfillment of the path. That's why he called the goal a refuge. But it is not found through the construction of self or through the changing elements of existence.

So once we've embarked on the creation of this self, we need to define ourselves in a certain way to give our personality a sense of continuity. We construct a self-image or self-view, a belief in who we are. And in order to maintain it, we have to take the events of the day and sweep them into our self-view. This is another part of what the activity is about.

Something happens to us during the day and we affirm, "Yes, that confirms my sense of being unworthy," or "That confirms my sense of never getting a fair deal in life," or "That confirms my sense of being better than everybody else here, of being smarter or more compassionate or something." So we take the events of the day and we reconstruct the self on those events to match who we take ourselves to be. And those patterns are fairly predictable because who we take ourselves to be needs to be ongoing.

This is summed up in a really nice quotation. This quotation has been attributed to the Buddha. I've never found it in the texts and I don't believe it's there, but let's pretend that it is because it's a great quotation: "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."

I'm going to read it again because there's an important point here: "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."

So we have all shaped and we are all shaping our character out of our thoughts and our intentions and our actions. And then that becomes the person that we take ourselves to be. This aspect of character then feeds into our personality view, our self-image, who we think we are. So our own actions shape the mind and then that mind takes a momentum that carries forward even when it's not appropriate.

I remember early in my practice, I was doing a three-month retreat in the summer in England. It was at the retreat center that was the precursor to Gaia House, the first Gaia House. It was in Wiltshire before Gaia House was bought in Devon. It's actually where Sally and I met. She was managing the retreat, and I came to sit for the summer, and that's how we got to know each other.

So I was a yogi there. And England in the summer can be really beautiful, as you may know. One evening, I remember it well—I was doing standing meditation out in the back garden underneath a tree, probably a

fruit tree like an apple tree or a pear tree that was flowering. I was doing standing meditation. My eyes were closed. I was on the lawn right next to this tree that was in full bloom.

My inner process was that at this point in my practice, I was going through a lot of fear. So fear was coming up strongly in my sittings and my walkings and in my standing. I was experiencing fear right then. So I was deep in my inner world and the thoughts and the feelings were going through and I was really caught in this emotion of fear and resisting it and hating it and so forth.

And something made me open my eyes. I opened my eyes and it was this beautiful, soft, British summer evening. The air was just mild and the blossoms were around me and that golden light of late in the day was falling on the garden and some birds were calling in the neighbor's yard. The grass was green. Everything was beautiful. I felt held in this beautiful, tender nature space.

And then the thought went through my mind, "Wow, yeah, it's really a scary place, this world." The contrast was just so amazing between what was going on in my head, which was just the momentum of images and feelings that I'd been developing for years, and the reality of the moment, which was open and clear and loving and beautiful.

So dharma practice is to take us out of these fabricated illusory realms of our projections and bring us back into the world of the present, which is in the end, even though it's not totally reliable, more reliable than our fabrications.

So we come back into the present and find the life and vitality and openness there.

As we come into practice, most of us have a lot of old momentum going—a momentum of habits, of thinking and feeling. This is part of what we meet when we're on the cushion. If these feelings are strong, which they are for most of us, we also find them in the body.

A lot of our deepest ways of relating to the world have become embedded in the body. This is why it's so important in the early part of the retreat that we give the instructions on how to be with the breath, using the breath to find your way into a grounded relationship with the body, and then how to stay in the body and explore everything you find there. Because a lot of old emotions are touched in the body. And a lot of the healing of meditation is about feeling them, opening to them, accepting them and letting them move in a way that they haven't been able to. They've been held in the body, and in that holding they've been frozen. So as we open up with mindfulness and tenderness, loving kindness, these can come up and come through.

We discover as we come into meditation that we have shaped our own patterns of relating to the world. Obviously, these have been strongly influenced for many of us by childhood events, relationships, abandonment, mistreatment, cruelty, abuse, neglect. Many unwholesome forces have come to bear on us. Out of responding to those, we've developed ways of relating that haven't always helped us.

So we come into those patterns, and for many of us who have found a way to support ourselves, have family life, these patterns of our personality are felt as the biggest problem in our life. We've learned how to take care of ourselves physically, to support ourselves financially, to build even loving relationships with friends and family. But the sense of freedom isn't so accessible if these patterns are strongly operative and we feel bound by them. We feel the constriction of that small sense of self from their operation.

So we start to come to terms with our anger or our fear, with our addictions or our dependency, our self-judgment, our sense of lack of self-worth, of not being lovable. This is all part of the field of meditation. You could say this is one of the hearts of the field of meditation: coming to terms with our personal legacies from the past, felt in the body, felt in the mind, felt in the heart.

We understand that these habits of mind and activity form into character. Based on what we've seen, we form an image of ourselves. That image then gets believed in, reinforces the hardness of the character, and then we keep affirming it by bringing the new events of our life into alignment with it so that the sense of continuity is uninterrupted. This is the dilemma that we find ourselves in. The patterns support the self-view and the self-view supports the patterns.

So how did this all get started? How does it keep going? The Buddha had an interesting commentary on this in a text from the Majjhima Nikaya—that's the middle length collection—called the Honeyball Sutta. It's number 18 in the Majjhima.

The sutta opens with the Buddha living in a part of India where he'd grown up. It's the area of Kapilavatthu. So he's back in his hometown, basically, as the Buddha. You get a little bit of a sense as the sutta opens of the life in northern India at this time, which is almost 2600 years ago.

It was a time of great spiritual ferment. Wanderers all across that region of India carried different philosophies, different teachings, different meditation practices, different beliefs. All these spiritual seekers would wander around and meet each other. The way they'd usually relate is they'd have these intense debates. "Here's what I think. What do you think? That's what you think? Here's an argument to that." It's kind of like a knockdown drag-out through the verbal realm. The person who was left standing was considered to have won, and his school prevailed.

At the beginning of this story, a man approaches named Dandapani. The name literally means "stick"—stick in hand. The commentary says that he was not an old person, but he always leaned on a golden stick. You get a sense of this person as a little bit flamboyant, a little bit vain. Carrying around the golden stick was a sign of his wealth and somewhat ostentatious.

So he approaches the Buddha, who's seated on the ground. He doesn't sit down near him, which would be a more respectful thing to do, but he stands on his cane and says to the Buddha, "What does the recluse assert? What does he proclaim?" In the language of the time, this is kind of provocative. It's not really a

polite way to address someone. It's kind of, "What do you think? What are you trying to teach?"

The Buddha undoubtedly picked up on that energy and replied, "Friend, I proclaim such a teaching that one does not quarrel with anyone in the world."

He completely took the ground out from under that kind of argumentative stance of Dandapani. And he said, "No perceptions underlie such a one who is free of craving." No perceptions underlie such a one—he was pointing to himself—who is free of craving.

And then it said that Dandapani sort of wagged his head and furrowed his brow and then strode off with his cane, obviously unhappy with the reply. So that's a little bit of a quizzical expression: "Perceptions no more underlie such a one."

So the Buddha went off to take a rest after recounting this story, and the monks were puzzled and asked another monk, "Well, what did he mean by that?" And so this other monk named Mahakaccana responds and explains what the Buddha was pointing to.

And this is what Mahakaccana says in his explanation: "Dependent on eye and forms, eye consciousness arises." This is kind of a stock phrase in the text, and what it means is, in order for us to see, we have to have a working eye, we have to have visible forms out there to see, and we have to be awake and functioning and have eye consciousness. When all three of those are there—the eye, something to see and we're conscious—then sight arises and that's called contact, seeing contact.

So he continues, "The meeting of the three is contact." So that's how a sight arises. Right now, you're experiencing contact as you look into the hall and you see everything that you see.

"With contact as condition, there is feeling." And here the feeling that's being pointed to is the Pali word vedana. It means a feeling tone. What you see is either pleasant, unpleasant, or neither—you might say neutral. So you might like what you see. You might dislike what you see. It might be kind of neutral.

You can take a look at your sight right now. My sight is quite pleasant. The meditation hall is beautiful. You all are sitting quietly, attentively. It's quite pleasing, the visual sight for me right now.

"What one feels, that one perceives." So now we need to look at this word "perceives" and what is going on with this word "perceives."

In Western psychology and philosophy, I think the word "perceive" is used in a little different sense. I think it just means the sense data. So when you see a sight, you're perceiving through seeing. That sight is the perception.

But in Buddhist language, perception means something different. In Buddhist language, the sight itself is just called contact. And then after contact, there's something else that happens called perception. And what perception is basically is recognition.

So perception is a little mental activity that happens after contact where you recognize what you're seeing. So as you're looking around the room now, you may not be noticing it, but you're recognizing elements such as woman, shawl, man, mat, wall, statue, flowers, and so on. Those things are perceptions. Those categories that you are able to put things in is the act of perceiving.

Now really, all there is, if you go back to the basics of sight, there are just patches of form and color. That's all sight is. If you close one eye, you see that even more clearly. You take away the three-dimensionality of it. There's just patches of form and color, but we've learned to interpret them as woman, shawl, man, mat, floor, wall, etc. So that's the act of perception. It takes things, puts them into categories based on memory.

So then, "What one feels, that one perceives."

Now, this perception has an emotional component to it. If we perceive something simple like the bell, there's not much charge around this perception. So we tend to leave it alone. But with other things, there's some charge, there's some meaning.

You know, it's a simple example, kind of a light way to look at it. If I say "car," that's just fairly neutral, right? It doesn't have much emotional impact one way or another. What if I say "Prius?"

Do you like? Is this a like? Like? I love to see a Prius because it means people are committed to helping the planet, saving gas, not polluting. I feel warm feelings when I see a Prius. What if you see a Humvee? Not so easy to like, is it? Too big. I feel a little scared when it's next to me. It's using a lot of gas, polluting the atmosphere more. So even a simple thing like a car, when we get to specifics, the perception of a Prius is one thing, the perception of a Humvee is another. Simple things can take on quite a bit of charge.

If I'm in a big group and it's time to go to lunch—I get to lunch early because my first meditation teacher told me that was a good thing to do—I'll go in and take one of the first seats in the dining room. This might be a conference, a meeting, could be a dining hall on retreat. I'll go in and sit with my meal at a table in what's still kind of an empty room, and often there are two empty chairs next to me.

As the room starts to fill up, those empty chairs take on a certain meaning. So I perceive there's an empty chair—in the beginning it's very neutral—but if the room is filling up and both the chairs next to me are still empty, I start to wonder: do I not have any friends here? Why does nobody want to sit with me? People are sitting with all the other people who sat down, but no one is sitting with me. Now the empty chair, that perception is frightening, because it means nobody loves me. Nobody wants to sit by me. And then I become so grateful when somebody sits down and fills that empty chair.

So even an empty chair, which is like nothing, takes on meaning, takes on emotional meaning. If I'm on an airplane flying from San Francisco to Boston, I get on early and I have an empty seat next to me. I have a very different attitude toward that empty chair. Then everyone who comes on the plane is a threat because I want to keep my empty chair. The first scenario is more desire, the second one is more fear, but both of them are different kinds of attachment—all about an empty chair. Empty chair seems like nothing,

but I built a whole drama around it out of my likes and dislikes.

So imagine not just empty chair, not just Prius or Humvee. Imagine when perception is one's child or one's dear friend or one's partner or one's body or one's body and illness or one's body and aging. Then the perceptions become much more loaded, much more charged. A lot of emotions come around those kinds of perceptions. So the perception of things opens the door to our whole range of connection and relationship and strong feelings.

So this sutta continues: "What one perceives, that one thinks about. What one thinks about, that one mentally proliferates." Mental proliferation is the translation of the Pali word papañca. And this is a word that I think you'll relate to quite immediately because it's this unreined-in quality of thinking that Heather was talking about a couple of nights ago—how once we get on a roll with our thoughts, they just go on and on and on and one thought leads to another through associations and different objects, and then those bring up a whole storm of emotions and feelings.

A simple example: sitting here in the hall, you look up at the front, you see that Buddha statue and you think, "I need a Buddha statue in my meditation room. My altar has just a little tiny one—I need a big Buddha statue like that. Maybe I'll go down and look in the store. Marianne has some nice Buddhas." I'll go look in the store, but I looked before and didn't see quite the one I wanted. If I had my cell phone on, I could look online. There are some good online shops, but I turned my cell phone into Beth the other day. Maybe I could get it back on the pretext of needing to call my caretaker at home. Would Beth believe me if I said that? Or would that be a violation of the precept? Okay, I think I can get online, and then which credit card should I use? Now, that one's maxed out. I think this one's okay, but do I have enough to pay for it on the automatic debit card?

So a simple inclination like "I'd like to have a Buddha," and we're into questions of truth and honesty, we're into sneaking down to do some shopping, we're into going online and checking out the stores, and do we have enough cash? Proliferation gets us into trouble.

So that's how the sutta unfolds. It begins quite straightforward: "What one perceives, that one thinks about." That's not a problem, as Heather pointed to as well. The first few thoughts we have about something are natural and harmless. We could simply place a period there and be done with it. But we often don't.

The sutta continues: "...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."

Notice how this sequence has progressed. It starts off being quite passive, beyond our control, and completely benign. The meeting of eye and forms brings contact. With contact, there is feeling. There's no choice there, not even an activity—just natural process unfolding.

Then it becomes slightly more active: "What one feels, that one perceives." Here we have some mental

activity as perception takes place. I recognize the car or the person or the statue. "What one perceives, that one thinks about." Still no problem. We can think logically, accurately, staying on the mark.

Now comes the crucial shift: "With what one has mentally proliferated, perceptions beset one with respect to past, future, and present." The proliferations now spiral beyond our control, wandering into past and future as well as present. When we enter past and future, we create grounds for hope and fear, for worry and regret. All of this begins to assault us.

We're no longer in passive mode. We're not even in active mode. We're in "being beset" mode. Suddenly we find ourselves victimized by the very patterns of thinking and feeling that fuel this mental proliferation.

As thoughts spin out of control, launching into past and future indiscriminately, they return to haunt us. They trigger our hopes and fears, our worries and regrets. The thoughts trigger emotions. Once we're caught in emotions, they trigger more thinking: "How do I get out of this? How do I deal with this? What am I going to do with this in my life?" The spinning continues, all based on our old patterns, because the "I" is operating throughout this entire process—the "I" with its concerns, self-image, and accumulated karma weaving through everything.

How can we get free from this? How can we become unhooked? Is it possible to have a perception—even a meaningful one like our own body, the memory of a partner, our work, our child, or even a pattern like the fear I felt under that fruit tree in England—and not spin out about it? Can we encounter something that carries emotion, feeling, and meaning for us, and meet it directly without proliferation?

If we can, that's the opening for mindfulness. Then mindfulness can establish a new relationship with that experience that isn't overlaid with all the accumulations from the past—our patterns, hopes, fears, assumptions about ourselves, our self-view. We can meet it fresh.

When we hold experience this way, without proliferation, we discover it within the context of silence. There's a silence of mind that we begin to touch. That silence is inherently peaceful because it's not assaulting us. We're not being beset by past and future. We're simply in direct, clean relationship with what's here in the present moment.

So we're not creating the self again. We're not proliferating it. We're not moving into self-assessment. We're not sweeping it into the creation of an identity. There's just this direct knowing through mindful attention in the present moment.

In a way, what we're doing is putting aside our likes and dislikes and just saying, here it is. Let me just connect with it just as it is. You know, these likes and dislikes are an integral part of who we take ourselves to be. We like certain things. We don't like other things. We like some people. We don't like others. We like some political parties. We don't like others. It's integral to our self-identity.

Often you meet a new person, have some conversation, and you have to decide: do you like that person or do you not like that person? That goes on for me sometimes—do I like them or do I not like them? That's an unnecessary question. Clear awareness can see a person, see a person's strengths, see their personality, see the limitations of the personality, and just rest there. We don't have to sum it all up with a like or a dislike.

When things are held that way, we see them accurately. This is not rose-colored in any way. But we don't have to proliferate about them or make up a story about them. And then things get held in a lot of space. They get held in that silence and in that peace.

This is what we're developing here with our moment-to-moment mindfulness as we explore all the different aspects of our experience. We're developing the capacity to meet things with a spacious and non-reactive awareness that just sees things the way they are and doesn't load them up with our projections and likes and dislikes, and doesn't load the encounter up with all of our past history, self-assumptions, and projections about our own continuing identity.

When we don't load up our experience that way, there's a lot more openness, a lot more space, and it lets our mind return to that limitless nature that is our birthright, that is a basic part of us.

This is where the practice is heading. This is what we're doing here. As we open into that peace, we find out that's not a constructed thing. It's not constructed out of our thoughts or out of our patterns. It's there all the time when we open to it. That silence is not a constructed thing. It's always available.

Its always being available means it's beyond the cycle of being born and dying. It's beyond the cycle of arising and passing away. So we are starting to come in touch with something that is a true refuge, not subject to birth and death. As we tune into it more and more, we find ourselves coming out from the cycle of birth and death, coming out of samsara, because we've stopped trying to fix it. We've stopped trying to project on it. And we're just meeting it the way that it is in this vast peace.

But this is not the end of the road. It's not that we're doing our meditation, we discover a little bit of peace, and that's that. This kind of peace is onward leading. This is the path. This becomes the path. And the Buddha said that opening to this peace, undoing this construct of self, leads us to the fullness of liberation, leads on to that unconditioned element of Nibbana.

The wonderful thing is we may just get a little taste of that silence or that peace, but it's a genuine foretaste of what's possible. We're finding a taste, a hint, a clue, an aroma of something that's beyond birth and death, of something that's beyond arising and passing. And as we put more and more of our faith in that, that deepens and it leads us, inclines the mind to that liberating understanding, the realization of the unconditioned, of the deathless.

This is our practice here.

So let's just sit for a moment together and let the words settle.

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