Self and Selflessness

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2007) · 1:01:58

So many aspects of the Buddha's teachings about the nature of suffering and about the possibilities of happiness and freedom resonate very easily with our common sense understanding of things, our common sense view of ourselves and the world. For example, the importance of non-harming as the basic moral principle of living in community, whether locally or globally. This is easy to understand. It makes sense. The understanding that everything in our lives is changing and that the more we cling, the more we're attached to that which in its nature is going to change, the more we'll suffer. Again, that's not difficult to comprehend.

But there's one aspect of the teaching that offers a profoundly different view of ourselves and of the world, one that changes our entire worldview. It's this understanding that makes the Buddha's enlightenment such a remarkable accomplishment in all of the spiritual cultures of awakening. This is the deep understanding and realization of selflessness or emptiness—in Pali, anatta. It is the understanding and realization of the insubstantiality of all phenomena. This is the great liberating jewel of the Buddha's teaching.

As our awareness, the observing power of the mind, becomes stronger and steadier and clearer, we see for ourselves that the self is not what we thought it to be. We begin to experience that the body is not self, that thoughts are not self, that emotions are not self, that even awareness, consciousness, is not self. We begin to see that this notion of self, this very deeply rooted notion, is a concept. It's a mental construction. It's a mental fabrication.

The Austrian philosopher who taught for many years in Britain, Wittgenstein, really captured the essence of this. He said, "The sense of a separate self is only a shadow cast by grammar." There's something very profound in that. We have created this concept through grammar.

Beginning to understand that self is a mental construct, that it's a fabrication of mind, sometimes comes as a great surprise, but it can also be a great relief. All those troubling aspects of one's personality with which you're becoming very familiar, and all the wonderful qualities—they don't belong to anyone. They are simply experiences. They are appearances arising out of changing conditions.

One Sri Lankan monk really summed up the great liberating power of understanding anatta. He said, "No self, no problem." That's the promise of this realization.

So tonight I'd like to speak about how the mind creates this very deeply conditioned concept of self, and how we can free ourselves from this great illusion.

The Abhidhamma, the Buddhist psychology, provides a very clear template of understanding. There are things we've mentioned before, so this is just a bit of a brief review. In Buddhist psychology, mind refers to the knowing faculty, that faculty which knows—knows a sight, a sound, a smell, a taste, sensation in the body, knows a thought. This knowing faculty is called consciousness: seeing consciousness, hearing consciousness, smelling consciousness, and so forth.

But what we call mind in English is also more than this simple bare knowing. It's more than this simple knowing faculty, because in each moment of consciousness, in each moment of knowing, there arise in different combinations a variety of mental factors. They arise in every moment of knowing and color the consciousness according to their own particular function. Greed colors the mind, colors consciousness in a particular way. Hatred colors consciousness in a particular way. Mindfulness, concentration, love, joy, wisdom, equanimity, restlessness—each one of these are factors of mind doing their own work; they have their own nature.

Now some of these factors of mind lead to happiness, and they're called wholesome. Some of these factors of mind lead to suffering, and they're called unwholesome. This is a pretty interesting designation, and it points to the very pragmatic nature of Buddhist ethics. Buddhist ethics is not about commandments. It's not "thou shall not do this" or "thou shall not do that." It's about understanding that this leads to suffering, this leads to happiness. Please take your pick.

So there's the simplicity of bare knowing, colored by a wide variety of mental factors, all arising and passing moment to moment in different combinations. Now there's one particular factor of mind which is common to every moment of consciousness—it's called a common factor—which, when out of balance with the others, keeps us imprisoned in the world of concepts, keeps us imprisoned in the world of self, in the conventional idea of self.

It's important to understand how this factor works, and it is the factor of perception.

In the Abhidhamma, perception is defined quite carefully. It's that quality or factor of mind which recognizes, names, and then remembers each arising object. For example, we hear a sound. Consciousness simply knows—hearing. Perception will pick out the distinguishing marks of that sound, recognize it as "bird," name it with the concept, and then store it in memory so that when we hear that sound again, it recognizes it, re-cognizes it. "Oh, bird, that's a bird." That's the function of perception.

When perception is in balance with mindfulness, it's like putting a frame around a picture. We put a frame around the picture in order to focus our attention on the picture—it helps us focus. When perception is in balance with mindfulness, perception is like the frame; we're recognizing what's there, and that recognition can help us be deeply mindful of the experience.

But when there's perception without mindfulness, perception without awareness—which is very often our usual way of being in the world, perceiving all the time without awareness—then we know and recognize

and remember only the very superficial aspects of what's happening. Mindfulness looks deeply into it. Perception is just the surface recognition. So it's more like we're looking at the frame rather than the picture. We give a name or a concept to an experience and then become limited by the name, by the concept.

A story I've told often illustrates this so beautifully, in a rather sad way. This was told to me by a friend of mine years ago. He had a little boy in the second grade or so, and the teacher asked the class, "What color are apples?" Everybody said red, or green, or golden. This little boy raised his hand and said, "White." The teacher said, "Apples aren't white. They're red, they're green, they're golden." But this little kid was very insistent—"No, they're white." The teacher was getting just as insistent—"No, they're not." They went back and forth a little bit, and finally, out of great frustration, the kid said, "If you cut the apple open, what's the color inside? It's white." But it was a little out of the box. What color are apples? Red. And then we can get so fixated on the concept that we actually don't look into the situation more deeply, more clearly.

Our perceptions—that is, the concepts with which we overlay experience—often condition the way we feel about things. The particular concepts we have about experience condition how we feel. And one of the things you may have been noticing is that very often they're inaccurate. We're not perceiving correctly.

Years ago, I was on a retreat here with Sayadaw U Pandita. As most of you know, he was a very demanding teacher. It was a very rigorous course—everybody was sleeping only four hours a night. I had to report to him every day about my experience, and everything was very pressured. We were not in the era of relaxed practice.

So I was doing walking meditation right outside here, just walking, and I glanced up at room 107 and saw him looking down at me, watching me walk. I kind of got myself together and started walking even slower, pretending to be mindful. Lifting, moving, placing. Then I look up—he's still looking. So again, I'm... And this went on for I don't know how long—ten minutes, fifteen minutes, twenty minutes—each time I would look up. And then I thought, "Why is he watching me for so long?" Because it really had an effect.

I had this whole emotional reaction about his watching me. And then I looked more carefully, and it wasn't Sayadaw U Pandita at all. It was a lampshade.

I had just made up this whole story with its attendant feelings and emotions. That's perception run amok.

We can see this tendency of how perception conditions our world, how it often limits our understanding and can solidify our sense of how things are through the concepts we employ in many areas of our lives. And sometimes, if we're not discerning, there can be very harmful consequences when we don't see how this is working.

Let me give you some basic examples—major concepts, perceptions which we employ in the world. We have many concepts of place: the world, the earth, divided into nations, into countries. How many wars

have been fought over boundaries? Are these boundaries real, or are they constructs? Mental constructs? One of the really inspiring things from those early astronauts in space was the almost mystical vision they had when they saw the Earth from above as a unity—the sense of all those separations falling away. It was a transforming experience, because most of us are so lost in this way of understanding the world, divided by concept.

Concepts of ideology are a huge source of suffering. Just the most blatant ones—there are endless examples, but consider recent ones: the creation of the concept of "the axis of evil." This country is okay, that one is the axis of evil. And looking the other way, "the great Satan." It's no wonder what is derived from those concepts, if one really believes them and gets caught by them. A whole view of the world is created by concept, by perception.

There are the concepts of ownership, of possessiveness. Again, sometimes there's a huge amount of suffering that comes from this concept. Just look at the legacy in this country of slavery. One hundred fifty, two hundred years ago, and we are still in the midst of the suffering of that legacy—the idea that somebody could own somebody else. That was just a construct of the mind, a perception that people got totally lost in. Or we see it today in the effects of colonialism. So much of the suffering in the Middle East stems from colonialism and the artificial boundaries of nations.

So this is consequential. This is not just some interesting philosophic point. When we don't understand how perception works in the mind, how it creates concepts and how we get caught and identified with these concepts, it has huge consequences.

On a much simpler level, but one that reveals how deeply this attachment goes—this construct, this perception of ownership and possessiveness—how would you feel if you walked into the hall and somebody was sitting in your seat? I'll bet it would be a moment. I'll bet something would go through the mind: "How could they be sitting in *my* seat?" And the Buddha talked of how we can't even be said to own this mind and body, much less anything else.

There's a beautiful little haiku poem by Ryokan, that great Zen master, poet, hermit, wanderer. He was very poor. He lived up in the mountains, just had this little hut in the mountains of Japan. He'd go out and play with the village children and wander the mountain paths. He had almost nothing. Then one day he came back to his hut and found that the few little possessions he had were stolen. They were gone.

So what did he do? He wrote a poem: "The moon at the window—the thief left it behind."

Now, let's do a little thought experiment. Imagine going home. Everything is stolen. "Oh, the moon at the window. The thief left it behind." I don't think so. Because we're pretty attached to the idea that we own things and that they're ours.

These go deep. We take them to be reality, when really they're the product of a concept, a certain kind of perception.

One that affects us even more than all of these—deeply conditioned—is the concept of time. The concept of past, of future. It's very interesting to examine and investigate: How do we actually experience the past? Not as a concept, as a construct, but how do we actually experience it?

We have certain thoughts or images. They're memories, remembrances, recollections of things that have happened. So we have certain thoughts or images, possibly emotions associated with them, arising in the moment. We perceive them. We make a concept about those kinds of thoughts or images—the concept of past. And then here's the interesting part: there's some kind of mental gymnastic involved, where we take this concept which we have just created and somehow toss it out behind us, as if it has a reality back there someplace.

We do the same thing with future. We're just sitting here minding our own business, watching the breath, and we have certain thoughts—imagining, anticipation, planning, fantasy. Thoughts or images arise, and we recognize them through perception. We make a concept about that category of thoughts—future—and then toss this concept out ahead of us, as if the future is out there waiting for us.

Not to get into the metaphysics of time—I'm talking in a very pragmatic way. What is our experience of past and future? Our experience of it is as a thought in the moment. It's the only way we experience it. And yet, if we don't see that, it's as if we are carrying the concepts of past and future on our shoulders, taking them to be a reality. It's like carrying two mountains around.

How much of the time that you've spent here has been lost in past, lost in future? With all of the emotions and all of the stories, it's huge. We spend our lives like this. It's no wonder we're tired—because we're carrying this huge burden. And all it is, is a concept.

This is not difficult to see. This doesn't take forty years of meditation. It's just paying attention to how the mind is doing this in the moment. See for yourselves. Watch what happens as these different kinds of thoughts arise. The concept of past and future weighs very heavily in our lives. It's a huge burden. A thought in the moment is very light. Really light. Just a momentary plan, a momentary memory. It's not a problem when we see it clearly.

Saint Augustine had a nice little quip about this. He said, "If the past and future really exist, where are they?" And it's pointing just to this experience.

We can see very often how these concepts of past and future condition how we feel, because they usually carry a lot of emotional baggage. We can see this very precisely on retreat—just watch the time thoughts about the retreat and notice the difference in how it makes you feel. You're sitting or walking and the thought may come: "Oh, three and a half more weeks left, four weeks left. I'll never make it. How many more sittings? How many more walks?"

What just happened? It was a thought. Just a thought. But because we created that concept of future, we jumped right into that little cartoon bubble and got burdened by it.

Or we might have the thought "a month left" and great, a month left, a month left to practice. It might affect us that way. We want to see it for what it is, and it's hugely liberating.

Now we get to something interesting, because not only is the past a concept, and not only is the future a concept—the present is a concept as well. We can create the concept of the present moment and become just as attached and fixated on the present as on the past and future. This, in fact, is an occupational hazard of meditators, because all of the instructions are: be in the present, stay connected to the present moment, be mindful of the present. And so all of the messages help to reinforce the notion that the present is the reality.

There's a well-known Portuguese poet, Fernando Pessoa, who wrote a poem that really captured my attention. The title of the poem, which is also the first line, says: "Live, you say, in the present." So I thought, I'll read on. "Live, you say, in the present. Live only in the present. But I don't want the present. I want reality." That was a powerful line. And the whole poem goes on to say how all of time is a construct—past, future, present.

The Buddha highlighted this in a very powerful teaching. This is from the Dhammapada, and this is a teaching that could enlighten one. If we really took it in. Listen. This is your chance. Yes. "Let go of the past. Let go of the future. Let go of the present and cross over to the further shore. With the mind wholly liberated, you go beyond birth and death."

So what does that mean, let go of the present? You might practice with that. As you're sitting, what does that mean? What's the experience? Let go of the present.

So there are concepts of place, of ideology, of ownership, of time. Lots of concepts of self-image. We just create images of ourselves, personas that we present to the world, that we present to ourselves. They can be worldly self-images, they can be spiritual self-images. How often do we get caught in the good yogi, bad yogi syndrome, where we create an image of ourselves as being a good yogi or a bad yogi, and then compare that to others and project that same syndrome onto others? It's all a concept. It's all a mental construct. It has nothing to do with anything.

I had a particularly vivid illustration of this. Again, this was that first year practicing with Sayadaw U Pandita. This was a three-month retreat, and after a few weeks, I saw all the yogis who seemed quite impeccable—you know who they are—really being mindful and attentive, the good yogis. And I saw, after a while, they all had little notebooks and they were writing things down. And then I thought to myself, "Oh, those are the good yogis. Sayadaw U Pandita must have given them a special teaching. He didn't tell me about that." And I felt terrible, you know, not having measured up.

Then a few weeks went by, and I saw the kind of casual yogis, you know, those who were a little sloppy in their practice. And they had little notebooks too. Then I thought, "Oh, well, my practice must be so good that Sayadaw U Pandita thinks I don't need a notebook." And so my mind was just going back and forth.

Good yogi, bad yogi. At the end of the retreat, I discovered that Sayadaw U Pandita hadn't said anything about notebooks to anybody. People had simply wanted to write down a few notes about their practice for their interviews. And I had made up this whole story all about self-image—spiritual self-image—a complete mental construction that had nothing to do with anything else.

It's interesting to look at some things that seem even more fundamental to us and see them in the light of perception and concepts: age and gender, race and culture. I have a few questions for you. What color is awareness? How old is your breath? Is the pain in the knee male or female? Is anger Eastern or Western, American, Burmese?

It's not to say that these concepts don't point to certain things in our experience, because obviously they do. And all of the concepts I've mentioned have their uses. So I'm not suggesting that we throw out the world of concepts. What I am suggesting is that we understand deeply that they are only concepts, and we don't confuse them with the underlying reality.

When we don't connect with the underlying realities, when we get identified in one way or another with the concept of age or race or culture or gender—and again, they do point to differences of experience—but when we get identified with the concept and miss the underlying realities, then we are setting ourselves up for divisiveness and conflict.

The deepest conditioning and habit of mind, the root source of so much suffering in ourselves and in the world, is the attachment we have to the concept of self. Self is another concept, a mental construct, just like all of these others. It is the idea that there is someone behind experience to whom the experience is happening. We create in our minds a reference point for all experience and then designate that reference point with the mental concept of self or I.

I want to talk a little bit about how this happens. We become attached to and identified with the idea of self because we rely on and are satisfied with a superficial perception. Self is like the frame—there's a superficial perception, we give a name, and then we get caught by the name. We get up in the morning, look in the mirror, recognize a certain appearance, and create a concept designating what we see: Joseph, self, I, me. And then we don't look more deeply to really understand what is actually there. We're satisfied with the superficial perception. Yep, that's me.

Let me give you an example of this. After a rainstorm, when the conditions are right and the sun comes out, we often see a rainbow. We see the rainbow, it's beautiful, and for most people we just feel happy. We see a rainbow and we smile. Usually we stay satisfied with the superficial perception—oh, that's a rainbow. We have that concept designating the experience, and we might begin to think that rainbow is actually a thing in itself.

But what is a rainbow? A rainbow is an appearance that comes out of certain conditions coming together—light and air and moisture. When these conditions come together in a certain way, a rainbow

appears. It's an appearance arising out of changing conditions, but the rainbow is not a substantial thing.

Self—Joseph, each one of us—is like that rainbow. Now, it doesn't mean that we don't see what we see. We do see a rainbow, but we can understand it as being an appearance rather than attributing some substantiality, some self-existence to it, which it does not have.

Likewise, we look in the mirror or we look at our lives and we see a pattern of appearances—the pattern of this physical body, the pattern of emotions and thoughts—and we give a designation to it: self, Joseph. All those things are there and we recognize the patterns. That is our very conventional understanding. But then we get fooled into thinking that the designation we give to it—Joseph, self, I—actually refers to something substantial in and of itself, as opposed to being a designation for an appearance, a pattern arising out of all these changing conditions.

How much of our sense of self comes from the superficial perception we have of this body? It seems so solid, so me. Some time ago I saw an advertisement in the New York Times for a t-shirt, and the logo, the words on the t-shirt, said: me, me, me.

So I thought we should have a meditator's t-shirt: not me, not me, not me.

When we observe the body more closely—yes, on a superficial perception there's the body, this is me, this is Joseph—but when we observe it more closely, we use the concept, the perception of body, as the frame to then look at the experience more deeply. What is it that we discover? What we're calling body is just a lot of interrelated systems. There's the circulatory system and the skeletal system and all the organs and everything that goes into making what we call the body.

We probably, if we were seeing it with clarity, wouldn't identify with the gallbladder and say, "Yes, gallbladder is me." If we saw the gallbladder: "Yep, that's me." Probably not. Liver, small intestines—no. But somehow we wrap it all nicely in skin, make a nice little package of it. "Yep, that's me." Because we're just not seeing deeply enough or clearly enough.

And when we don't see it deeply and clearly, as we know, it's very easy to get attached to it. If we had x-ray vision, how attached would we be to either our body or other people's bodies? I don't know.

And of course the corollary of attachment to the body—and this doesn't have to do with not appreciating it or taking care of it or all the things that are valuable to do—but attachment to it as being self, what's the corollary to that? Fear of losing it. If we are living in this view that this body is who I am, the inevitable corollary is fear of losing it, fear of death.

Of course, if we come down to a much more refined level, a molecular level or atomic level, as I'm told—I haven't seen it, but as I've read—it's mostly empty space. And all of the matter that comprises the body, I read someplace that all the matter, if you take the space away, is no bigger than a particle of dust. Even if it's several particles of dust—so what are we attached to? What are we identifying with? It's because we're

not seeing deeply enough.

In meditation, as awareness gets stronger, we go from the perception of the body as something solid that we can and do easily identify with, to the experience of it for ourselves. We really begin to experience it as a fluid energy field which loses all that sense of solidity, and there's much less identification with it at that time.

I want to read some fun stories about how when we're not fixated and attached to the notion of the solidity of the body as being I, as being self, many things are possible. These are just some stories from the book about Dipa Ma, who I think we've spoken of over the years—this amazingly wonderful teacher in Calcutta who was an extraordinary yogi with the highest attainments in both vipassanā and samatha concentration practice, including psychic powers.

These are some of the things she did with her great power of concentration and absorption. And these are pretty classic—you can read about how these powers work in the texts.

Once Munindra—Munindra was both my first teacher and also Dipa Ma's teacher—once Munindra was in his room when he noticed something unusual in the sky outside his window. He looked out and saw Dipa Ma in the air near the tops of the trees, grinning at him and playing in a room she had built in the sky. By changing the air element into the earth element, she had been able to create a structure in mid-air.

Changing denser elements to air produced only slightly less astonishing occurrences. Sometimes Dipa Ma and her sister arrived for interviews with Munindra by spontaneously appearing in his room, and Dipa Ma occasionally left by walking through the closed door. If she was feeling especially playful, she might rise from her chair, go to the nearest wall, and walk right through it.

Dipa Ma's abilities in this regard were once tested and confirmed by a third party. Munindra knew a professor of ancient Indian history at Magadh University who was very skeptical about psychic powers. Munindra offered to prove the existence of such powers, and the two of them set up an experiment. The professor posted a trusted graduate student in a room where Dipa Ma was meditating to watch and make sure she didn't leave the room. On the appointed day, the student verified that Dipa Ma never left her meditation posture. And yet, at the very same time, she appeared at the professor's office ten miles away and had a conversation with him.

First I need to say, and which most of you know, these powers do not have anything particularly to do with enlightenment. One can be fully liberated without any of these powers, and one can have these powers without in any way being liberated. So it's important to be careful not to confuse them. But the reason I mention it—first because I just like the stories—but it shows how our concepts can be so limiting. I mean, this is so far outside of the Western conceptual worldview. And you're among the few people I would read this to because, you know, it's just...

Our concepts can limit us. And even if you don't believe this or believe it's possible, at least I hope you'll

entertain the possibility that there are many things that are possible that we don't yet know. It comes from understanding that this body, which we take to be so solid and real and so self, so *me*, is really an energy field. And certain beings with these great powers of mind that come from samadhi—they can play with these elements.

So the sense of self comes when we get identified with or attached to the concept of body, when we're not looking at it more deeply. It also happens, as we well know, when we're lost in and identified with our thoughts and emotions, with all these internal stories and dramas that we're telling ourselves so often through the day. We're creating all of these mind worlds. None of it is happening. It's so amazing. We're sitting and then we just get lost in a thought, lost in a story, lost in an emotion as if it's real—not seeing that it's just a thought, it's just an emotion.

Munindra had a great line pointing this out. He said it very often, so it's stuck in my mind. He said, "The thought of your mother is not your mother—it's a thought." If we could remember that, our lives would be so much lighter. We're taking the thoughts, the concepts, we're taking them to have a reality that they don't have. We're building a whole picture, and meanwhile they are just a thought. That's all that's going on.

Not only that—not only is the thought of your mother not your mother—the thought itself, the emotion itself, does not belong to anyone. So even when we see the thought as a thought, we can get caught with identifying, "Well, *I'm* the one who's thinking." That "I" is extra.

There's a great Tibetan image in a teaching that talks about the clouds that wander through the sky—no roots, no home. I love the image because can you picture clouds going through the sky with roots? Each cloud rooted to the ground. It's kind of a ridiculous image. Well, they speak of how thoughts and emotions are like these clouds. Thoughts and emotions wander through the mind—no roots, no home. They're simply arising like cloud formations. They're arising out of conditions. They are not rooted in anything. They arise out of conditions in the open sky of the mind. They come into being. Conditions change. They disappear.

But what we do is we root them. "This thought is me. This thought belongs to me. This emotion is mine. I'm angry. I'm happy. I'm sad." So we need to see how we're doing this, because this is the creation of the concept of self. This is how we get caught. We're rooting that which is rootless.

It's like what we call self is a mosaic. Self, "Joseph," is an appearance of a lot of different elements coming together in a pattern, and the pattern is there. We recognize that pattern. All of that is fine. When we look more deeply, though, we see that the pattern is created by the interplay of all of these changing elements. It's not that the elements belong to anyone. What we are is the pattern of changing elements.

Now, the most subtle level of attachment and identification—and the one where we get the most caught in terms of creating a sense of self—is our identification with consciousness, with knowing.

Even as we get some idea—and by now you probably have to some extent—we begin to get a sense of this body as just changing elements, coming and going. Thoughts coming and going. Emotions coming and going. We get some sense of the selflessness of it all.

But then we become identified with the knowing. "Well, I'm the one who's knowing all that." We create a sense of the witness, the observer. "I'm the observer of all this." And so we create, in our minds, this concept of the observer set apart from and separate from experience.

But through a growing careful attentiveness, we just keep looking at this process, all the aspects of it—both what is known and the knowing. We just keep being with it, observing, being mindful, being aware. We begin to see through a growing wisdom that consciousness itself is dependent on conditions. Consciousness itself is arising out of conditions and passing away.

I want to mention one little experiment I did—a thought experiment. When I was on retreat last year at the Forest Refuge, in the very classical teachings, the Buddha talks of how each sense-door consciousness arises out of conditions. For example, seeing consciousness happens when there's a physical organ of an eye, there's light, there's an object in front of the light, and there's attention. Physical organ of eye, light, object, attention—seeing consciousness will arise. And the same is true of all of the senses: ear, nose, tongue, taste.

So I was at the Forest Refuge, in the dining room eating lunch, and I started playing with this notion of taste consciousness, remembering these teachings of how taste consciousness arises out of conditions. What are the conditions? Tongue, food, saliva, and attention. Given those, the taste consciousness is going to rise.

So I did this little thought experiment. First, I started experimenting, watching the sense organ, the tongue. It's a weird organ. When you really pay attention to it, there's this thing moving around in the mouth that seems to have a mind of its own. But when you really look carefully, you see it's just doing everything it's doing. There's intention behind it, but it's kind of strange.

Then I did this little thought experiment: would taste consciousness arise if there were no tongue? And it was obvious that it wouldn't—that that consciousness was dependent on having an intact sense organ. It was very straightforward, very clear. But just by doing that experiment right in the moment of the sense experience, it was really quite impactful. Oh, no tongue, no taste consciousness. It's as if one could almost see the disappearance of that moment of consciousness—see so clearly how it's dependent on conditions and how the consciousness itself is not self. It's not I. It's just a function happening when all of the conditions come together. We can do this with each of the senses. It's very interesting—one way of deconstructing the notion of self, of I.

Now sometimes people hear all this and get a little panicky. "Oh my God, what's going to happen? We deconstruct the self and I'm going to just disappear." Nothing changes. Everything is exactly as it always

was, except that we're understanding it more clearly, more accurately. There's less attachment, less identification. All the processes keep on working just fine. But we're not imprisoned by this construct of self which we have created. It's very liberating.

The Buddha gave one very powerful teaching to his son Rahula, who at this time had become a monk.

It's a very direct teaching. The Buddha said every aspect of this mind and body should be seen with perfect wisdom: "This is not mine, this is not I, this is not myself."

This can become a mantra for us—a mantra of instruction, a mantra of pointing out. Whatever arises, whether it's the object, the thought, the consciousness, any experience that arises from any side, from any angle, we can remind ourselves: this is not mine, this is not I, this is not myself. We free ourselves from that identification.

Through a growing recognition of selflessness, we develop a deepening sense of connection. And this is kind of the joy of it all. Because on the deepest level, we begin to realize there is no one there to be separate. We have created the sense of separation through our identification and investment in this concept. As we begin to settle in, as that Japanese nun wrote, which I mentioned last week, we open the fist of our mind and fall into the midst of everything. That's what we're doing when we let go of our identification with this concept.

I'll just close with one teaching from one of the great Tibetan masters, Kalu Rinpoche. It kind of sums up this whole talk. He said, "We live in illusion and the appearance of things. There is a reality. We are that reality. When we understand this, we see we are nothing, and being nothing, we are everything."

That is all.

Let's sit for a couple of moments. Just in these few moments, sit and don't do anything—just sitting and being in the momentary experience as it unfolds. As Ajahn Buddhadasa, a great Thai monk, said: there's nothing to do, nothing to be, nothing to have. Experience is just arising, passing away. It's selfless phenomena rolling on.

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