Sakkāya-diṭṭhi: Who Do I Take Myself To Be?

Sharda Rogell · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2007) · 58:00

In March of this year, I was teaching a retreat at one of my favorite places, which I've mentioned before in one of my talks, at the retreat center in New Zealand called Temawata. I've been going there each year, and it's one of the places I really love. If you've been there, you know it's very clean and the skies are very clear.

One night on the retreat, about four or five days into a ten-day retreat, we were realizing that we hadn't seen the moon in a while. And it wasn't because there were clouds in the sky. It was a very clear night. The nights during this retreat were very, very clear. In this part of New Zealand, when the skies are clear, you can see stars like you've never seen. You can see the Milky Way and the black holes in the Milky Way, and it's really spectacular.

So we kept wondering why the moon hadn't come up. Another night went on, and still no moon in this clear, clear sky. It went on a few more nights, and the staff I was with and the teacher I was with started getting very curious about this. Why isn't there a moon? We would go out and look over the horizon. We were down in a little bit of a valley with hills up above, and some of the yogis started coming out and saw us looking for the moon. It became this thing—where is the moon now? Five days, six days. It just doesn't happen like that.

Then we started making up stories about the moon. Maybe the moon blew up. Maybe somebody hijacked the moon. Maybe we'll never see the moon again. All these stories. We started to have fun with it, playing with it. But we didn't know. We didn't know what was going on.

Then, like the sixth night, we saw a tiny, tiny little white point of the moon coming right over the hill. A lot of yogis were involved at that point. "There's the moon! There's the moon!" It was all very exciting, and then the moon started coming up just over the horizon.

I'm mentioning this because when we don't know what's going on, in our confusion sometimes, we start making up stories about what's really true. In this case we were having a good time with it, but it started to reflect how this is what we do. We start making up stories, and depending on the clarity of mind and the stability of mind, we could have started believing some of these stories—like maybe we would never see the moon again, or maybe it did blow up, or somebody stole the moon.

In a way, the moon is a good metaphor here for the potential that we have for ourselves to be awake, to wake up. This capacity, this potential of being an awake person—what that would be like—and yet we doubt it. We don't know if it's true. We don't think it's there, this capacity, this experience of being awake.

And then we make up all kinds of stories about who I am and who I take myself to be and who we are. We believe the stories and forget that maybe there's another truth or another reality that we may not be able to see right now.

For us, we could have walked up the hill a little bit further, and probably if we got up on the hill, we would have seen the moon. But where we were standing, where we were located, we couldn't see it. And in the same way, where we're located, we may not be able to see—but does it mean it's not there? Does it mean that that potential, that capacity, that truth of who we are is not real?

So why is it so hard to know ourselves clearly? We've talked about this; this is what most of the talks have been about. Until we really are fully awake, our mind is hindered by the forces of mind—of greed, of hatred, of confusion. These forces become obstacles to this clear seeing. We get so identified with our stories. We get so identified with what our mind is telling us. We get identified with our views and our opinions, and they seem so real. That's our predicament. That's the human predicament.

One of my favorite stories that I heard early on in my practice is the story of painting tigers on the wall. Some of you may have heard this. Long, long time ago, a caveman went into a cave and was painting beautiful pictures on the walls. In this case, this man was painting a tiger, and he was very artistic in the way that he could paint this tiger with a lot of realism.

Just as he was getting to the end of the painting, finishing it up—right at maybe the tail—he looked at it and went, "Oh my God, it's a tiger!" and ran out of the cave. It was so real, became so believable.

I like that story so well because in the same way, we are painting tigers on the screen of our mind, and they become so real that we run. We run away. It's the way it is. And yet with awareness, with mindfulness, we can begin to look and see what's really true—what's really true about what our minds are telling us, about what a formation of a thought is, what an emotion is, what this conception is of who I take myself to be.

When I was at Gaia House in England doing a retreat one time, I noticed that when I would go into my room, there was a mirror on the wall, and I would go past the mirror and look in it. I don't know—I think women may be a little bit more prone to this. I don't really have a sense of men's identity around their appearance. But I would look into the mirror, and there would be this kind of disheartened feeling. And then I would try to ignore it. The next time I'd walk in the room, there was the mirror, I would look, and again this disheartened feeling. It just kept happening again and again.

Finally I thought, okay, I really have to look at this—look at this view, look at the way that I'm holding this view about this image in the mirror that I take to be me. At the time, I was reading some of the texts of the Buddha in the Pali Canon, and I found this wonderful quote that I then put up. I took the mirror down and put the quote up on the wall.

This is the quote, from the Buddha: "Non-identification has been declared by the Blessed One. For in

whatever way one conceives, the fact is other than that."

This is such a profound reflection. Whatever way—it's not just some of the ways—whatever way the mind conceives, the fact is other than that. This is a reflection that I have really taken deep into my heart when I start to get caught up in the solidification of the storylines. Whatever way I'm conceiving, the fact is other than that. I can't know. I can't even imagine. My small little mind cannot make sense of what the reality is.

It's a very interesting practice, if you want to do it, to look in the mirror and see if you can just look at the image—the color, the shape, just the bare image—and then notice the thoughts that arise in the mind in relationship to the image. You can really start to get a sense of the way the mind projects this conceptual overlay on top of the image, and then that gives shape to the reality of what happens. Rather than just standing and looking and getting a sense of what it's like without projecting the conditioned memory, the response on top of that image. It's a very interesting practice to do. You might want to try it if you're courageous. I've asked people to do it before and they go, "Oh no, I can't do it, I can't do it." Just to see what happens.

What happens is that we often get caught in that conceptual projection, in that conceptual overlay. There's this wonderful word in the texts that you've probably heard: *papañca*. This conceptual overlay is *papañca*. *Papañca* is the proliferation of mind—the tendency of mind to proliferate issues of a sense of self. It's how we project this sense of self into an imaginary reality, and it becomes so real. We really take this up, the sense of I, me. Sometimes *papañca* is translated as distortion or elaboration or exaggeration—all these different ways that the mind can take shape.

Another chain of dependent origination, another kind of side chain of the ones you've heard so far, goes like this: if what one feels and perceives—with the *vedanā* and the perception, the pleasant or unpleasant or neutral, and the perception—when those two come together, this gives rise to a thought about the perception. What one thinks about, one proliferates. And this proliferation, if it's not seen, is the *papañca*, or this "papañca-izing." We could papañca-ize, if this is not seen. If we get caught in it, this becomes our reality.

Being here at IMS, I was remembering some of my past experiences, all the years that I practiced here. I was remembering the very early years of my retreat experience, in the first three-month course back in the very early eighties.

And I remembered this one time where I was wanting to sit longer through breakfast sometimes. Yet the person who was cleaning the meditation hall, who happened to be a good friend of mine, would come in fairly soon at that time and start vacuuming the meditation hall rug. I remember getting so angry at him. I'm sitting, sitting, sitting, trying to sit longer, and then all this aversion would rise up. "Why is he vacuuming the meditation hall when I'm trying to..." I was the only one in the meditation hall. I'm the only one sitting there. I'm trying to meditate. He should not be vacuuming the meditation hall.

I would sit through it, and the next day I would do it again. He'd come in and start vacuuming. I'd get so angry at him, and it was his fault. He should not be vacuuming. I never, ever considered the fact that maybe I could just get up and leave while he did his yogi job. It was just this self-righteous sense of "he should not be doing this. I'm going to sit here until he understands that I'm meditating and he'll stop." This whole papañca, which in this case took the form of aversion.

Maybe you've noticed that aversion wants to find some hook. It wants to find something to hook itself on, like a coat hook. "I'm feeling all this aversion. I'll be averse at that person because I don't want to really feel this aversion." So it all went onto him. And he was my friend. He should know better. I'm trying to meditate.

If we don't find a hook in the inner world, we can find a hook in the outer world. And all these characters that are all around us—it's their fault, they need to change. Not only is the projection about ourselves and what's happening here, this papañca, but then the projection goes out to all the other characters. Our world becomes very three-dimensional, kind of holographic, this reality that we're generating through our papañca. It's not just here but all around—this shape of our mind, really, is what starts to happen.

This can feel even more true because the thoughts generate emotions. So it's not just thinking, but the thinking and the feeling come together. We have this whole bigger experience of papañca—not just the proliferation, but the way we engage the emotions, which then projects this sense of reality out. Emotions here and then emotions out.

Papañca is like getting on a train to a destination. Sometimes we like where we're going—that's why we get caught in it a lot. And a lot of times we don't like where it's going, but if we don't have any way to control that, we're just on the train going wherever the papañca is going.

One of my favorite papañca-ings in the early years was fantasizing about tropical islands, because I had never been on a tropical island. My conditioning was to always want to be on one. How many people have been on tropical islands in the last couple of weeks? I don't know if that's your particular favorite fantasy. I'm sure you have other destinations that you've arrived at.

But I liked this fantasy so much that I actually manifested it in reality. I wound up on a tropical island. That's what can happen. We have to be a little bit careful about our papañcas because we actually may arrive in reality at the very place we are imagining.

So I arrived at this tropical island about twelve years ago—Koh Tao, on the islands of Thailand. I had my fantasy, my papañca with it, until I realized what the reality was: it was May, and it's very, very hot at that time. Within five days or so, I wound up getting dengue fever. You get bit by a mosquito and this very high fever happens. People die from dengue fever. I was very, very sick.

So not only did my fantasy turn out to be very unpleasant in terms of the temperature, but then I almost died in reality. Fortunately, I was able to come out of it without too many consequences. But the reality is

very different than our imagination. Whatever way we conceive it, the fact is other than that. We don't know. It's just a story in our imagination until it becomes a reality.

In Buddhist psychology, it points to what are called three springs of papancha—three obsessive views that are governed by the torments of our mind: greed, hatred, and confusion. These give rise to this misconception of self, which supports the way the mind embellishes and conceives experience. These three springs are me, mine, and I am.

Me is sakayaditthi. This means personality view, or identity view, or a view of a permanent self, a solid, separate self. It's a wrong view when we believe this to be the way things are. Mine, the second obsessive view, is tanha—the clinging. This is mine. This is mine. We cling to the conditions that are arising and passing as myself. And the third is I am, which is mana, or conceit—this building up of I. I am. I am this. I am that. In Western psychology, this is simply called ego. This is what we call ego-self.

One of my teachers, Hamid Ali, defines ego this way. He says ego is a psychic structure that is based on crystallized beliefs about who we are and what the world is. These beliefs are formed very early in our childhood, and they're reinforced over time through the continuation of identification with those beliefs. This is what gives rise to a particular identity of who we take ourselves to be.

In the Buddhist teachings, traditionally there are five crystallized beliefs, or five processes, that make up our life. These are called the five aggregates, or the five skandhas, which when we cling to them, become who we take ourselves to be. This is what gives formation to the sense of self. I take my body to be myself—we cling to the body as self. I take my feelings to be myself, the vedana. I take my perceptions to be myself. I take my conceptions to be myself—the mental activity, the thoughts, the images, which lead to the emotions. I take consciousness to be myself.

This is what gives formation to the sakayaditthi, the identity view, the personality view. This is who I am. This is mine. This body is mine. These feelings are mine. These perceptions are mine. Consciousness is mine.

But the Buddha, in different places in the texts, offers a wonderful kind of refrain where he says: this body is not myself. These feelings are not myself. The perceptions are not myself. Conceptions are not myself. Consciousness is not myself. These are simply five crystallized beliefs that we cling to, which give the sense of me. This is tanha, one of the obsessive views—the clinging.

But it's important to really understand here that the Buddha did not say these conditions do not exist. The conditions of body, the conditions of feelings, of perceptions, of conceptions, of consciousness—it's not that they don't exist. They exist. They're real. What we are invited to do is not cling to them as mine, as me.

And we have been talking about the why. Why not cling to these things? Because clinging to these beliefs is limiting. It's very narrowing, and it causes suffering. When we identify ourselves in this way, it gives rise to our suffering.

And it interferes with the revelation of the truth. It limits our clear seeing. We can't see clearly because the identification becomes an obstacle to that clear seeing.

There was a yogi last week who came and reported an experience that she was having. It was after Sally introduced the standing meditation. She came in and talked about the experience for herself of doing the standing meditation, and she said that when she first started doing it, she hated it. She just hated it. It was very hard for her to stand and to actually feel her body. And it made her very upset because she had said that she had actually done a lot of work around being in her body and feeling her body, and it really upset her and frustrated her that this was coming up again. Why is this here? I've done so much work. This should be done. It should be over with.

But yet she stayed with the mindfulness. She stayed with the awareness. She really wanted to look and see what was true. And when she really felt what was happening, there actually wasn't that much there in reality. It was more of a mental conception. It was more of an idea that was overlaying her experience. But when she really brought the attention right down through into the conditions of the body, there wasn't that much there. She said it was just a tendril of the past. It was a shadow of the past. And it changed her whole relationship. So it is not what I thought. And she had a much more balanced view. She said, now I know that I'm actually not done. There's a little bit more work I have to do, but it's just the way it is. There's no kind of emotional charge around it because of the disidentification with the conception of what was actually going on.

And I think you can see in your experience how sometimes the idea comes in so quickly from the past about how you imagine the experience is going to be, whatever it is—whether it's about lunch or it's about another yogi or it's about a pain in the knee or a memory that's arising. And there's no, not that, or it's going to be like this, or I don't want to go there. Whatever we start to imagine about it, but when we really start to feel and sense and look directly, it's often not what we imagine it to be.

The difference between being caught in the imaginary reality of our conceptions and coming into the direct reality or the bare experience of our bare contact—to see what's actually happening, what's there. This is how we begin to unhook from the past conditioning, from this sense of what feels so solid about who we take ourselves to be. In this case, the body is not the problem, just the way we are relating to it, or the way she was relating to it.

In the same way, our thoughts or our mental activity are really not the problem either. We can so easily start to think that, well, I just have to stop this thinking or this conceptualizing and then I'll be fine. But that isn't it either. It's not that we have to stop the thoughts or stop the pattern of thinking. The thinking is actually a gift that we have to be able to navigate and negotiate our world. The problem is when we take our thoughts to be the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

We cling to our thoughts about our intelligence, about our attractiveness, about our age, about our physical well-being, our emotional stability, our spiritual progress. We can cling to all kinds of thoughts.

Just six or seven months ago, I noticed that I started to form a thought around my memory—that I was not remembering things in the way that I used to, that I am really forgetful. And I could see how this whole identity was starting to form around myself, that something was wrong with me and I'm losing my mind, you know, whatever kind of thoughts can start to form around that. It's just sometimes I just wouldn't remember. Didn't have to make a big deal out of it. And just that recognition of having a different relationship to it changed everything.

One time a yogi came in for an interview and just said, "You know, maybe I really am just a miserable person. Maybe that's what I'm discovering about myself. And maybe what motivates me is because I really am a miserable person. That's who I am." We can characterize ourselves around one thought.

Just for you to reflect on this now about yourself—if there's one thought that you seem to pick up or easily pick up. "I'm not a very good yogi." "Nothing spectacular is happening in my practice." Today I was thinking that if we did group interviews, that would be a very popular comment: nothing spectacular is happening in my practice. Or the opposite.

My practice is going really great because so many spectacular things are happening—which is just something else to get identified with. Or we think that other people seem to really understand this meditation so well, judging by the kinds of questions they ask in the hall, while we don't understand it at all. These are just different ways of building up a self-image or identity.

I wonder if we really can evaluate our practice very well. Are we the best people to evaluate? Do we really know? What are we listening to? We're just listening to the same old tape, and then we think we can learn something from the way our mind is telling us about our practice. I think that's one you could let go of. A teacher told that to me a long time ago: don't evaluate your practice.

So just consider for a moment if there's a thought about yourself that you're wrapping your identity around while you're here—maybe just today or in the last few days. You're starting to believe an identity, a view, an identity view. Clinging to these thoughts is what holds the structure of "me" together. This is what holds it together—this tanha, this clinging.

The third fetter, after sakkāya-diṭṭhi and tanha, is conceit, māna—the sense of "I am." I want to take note as I start to talk about this: notice if there's any kind of response within yourself about exploring whether you're conceited or not. Because conceit can have a charge. This word has a bit of a charge to it. We don't want to be thought of as conceited or having conceit. "Not me. I'm not conceited." It can easily happen that we want to push this one away.

Conceit is when there is pride—when there is superiority or arrogance in the mind, some way that we can elevate ourselves or single ourselves out as different, or make ourselves special in some way. We can feel superior about our appearance, about our class, about our gender—women are better than men, or men are better than women, or whatever. We can feel conceit around our color of skin, what we own, our

religious status—about anything.

It's these things that give rise to so many problems in our world, and really what drives our world in a very fundamental way. This gives rise to racism and religious wars, homophobia, issues around age and youth and beauty and wealth. It's endless what this view gives rise to and how it conditions and propels this energetic force into the world. We can really feel, when we are caught in these views, how they can drive our ambitions and desires. It's so self-centered, so ego-driven. This is how we can feel and sense this word "ego self."

And this starts very, very young for us. When I was twenty-one years old, just finishing college and trying to find myself and who I was in the world, trying to locate myself in some way, I had a brother who was three years older than me, and so I consulted with my older brother. How do I find myself? How do I move forward in the world? And he said to me, "You've got to get yourself an identity. First thing you have to do is be somebody who's different, who's unique, who's unusual."

So I took his advice. I thought my brother was wise. At that time I had kind of dark brown hair, so I dyed it blonde, and I wore black turtlenecks, and I became an artist. I walked around with a big black portfolio under my arm. Jeans, blue jeans—I really fit the image. And that was my identity.

Until I realized that I wasn't actually that good of an artist. That was hard. That was hard to take in, because to really hold up the identity, I needed to be a good artist. But it just wasn't holding together as well as I'd like, and that really was hard. I could just feel it crumbling. What am I going to do now? If I'm not really an artist, then where's my identity? Who am I? I could feel my ground so unsteady, so unreliable. Who am I? What am I going to do? How do I move in the world without an identity?

But not having the wisdom, not having the understanding at that time, I was still looking for something to hold on to, somebody to be, somebody to become—conceiving myself in some way. And you can see how when we come to our spiritual practice and our spiritual path, we can just transfer that pride onto our meditation. It becomes spiritual pride or spiritual conceit.

I remember in the early days when I was in India with my teacher, Poonjaji. It was a really wonderful time, having some very good experiences and some very deep insights with him. And then I just started to feel so special, being able to be a little bit more in the inner circle with him.

And I'm just so special and I really understand and I really got it. What I didn't know at the time was that I was simply taking up another position of ego, of conceit. Until a little later when you look back and see, oh yes, there it is again. So insidious.

What happens is that we idealize certain attributes that we like—light and open and happy and compassionate, whatever it is—and then cut off the ones that don't fit that image. I want to be this, I don't want to be that. It's just another way of splitting off. The ego gets constructed in a particular way, and we deny and suppress and pretend certain aspects aren't there, and they just go underground. They get

hidden away, compartmentalized. Until perhaps, with our mindfulness and awareness, we can bring that forth again to look more completely at who am I, what's going on here.

Oftentimes that construction of conceit is built upon deeply hidden ideas that we are nothing, or somehow we're wrong or bad or evil. And then we have to build up this whole other structure of who we think we are. All of that just gets hidden. Jung called this the shadow—how it just gets put aside. Maybe for some people, never to be looked at at all.

Here's a story that exemplifies spiritual pride. One day a rabbi, in a frenzy of religious passion, rushed in before the ark, fell to his knees, and started beating his breast, crying, "I'm nobody, I'm nobody." The cantor of the synagogue, impressed by this example of spiritual humility, joined the rabbi on his knees, saying, "I'm nobody, I'm nobody." The shamus, the custodian, watching from the corner, couldn't restrain himself either. He joined the other two on his knees, calling out, "I'm nobody, I'm nobody." At which point the rabbi, nudging the cantor with his elbow, pointed at the custodian and said, "Look who thinks he's nobody."

This building up—even building up "I'm nobody." Anything, anything we can build up.

And the other side of this conceit, if you might be sitting and thinking, "Well, I don't really elevate myself"—the other side of this is making ourselves small. Thinking of ourselves as limited and small, which is really another form of conceit: I am small, I am worthless, I am a victim. It's still another way that the belief crystallizes around the sense of self, this comparing and judging. We separate or we cut off in a negative way, which keeps us feeling small and contracted in this view.

But if it makes you feel any more comfortable, it's always good to know that this fetter of conceit doesn't drop away until very advanced stages of awakening. So if some of the things I've talked about are resonating with you, be careful not to judge yourself or form another view about yourself, like, "Oh, I am really caught in conceit." That's just another "I am," so you can watch that thought. But this really takes a long time to work through, this sense of I am someone.

Here is an example of this freedom from the "I am," from Shantideva, an eighth-century Buddhist philosopher: "Even when I do things for the sake of others, no sense of amazement or conceit arises. It's just like feeding myself. I hope for nothing in return." Just like feeding myself. This beautiful flow of expression, of kindness, compassion.

In clinging to this tanha—"this is mine"—and the conceit of "I am," this is what gives rise to the third obsessive view of sakkaya-ditthi. So these three views—tanha (mine), conceit (I am), and sakkaya-ditthi, this personality view or identity view—solidify around our experience.

When we're talking about personality or self in this way, we're really talking about our habits of mind, or sankharas—these conceptual frames of mind that get reinforced through repetition. The way our mind inclines in habitual ways, patterns that we set in motion over time. It's these habits that build up the entire

construction of our self-view, or even our worldview. And without awareness and mindfulness, we don't really know what we're building up. There's very little room to do anything differently. We're just caught in the habit.

That's why mindfulness is so important—because it can begin to break up this construction, the way that we hold it. We start to poke holes in the construction, so it's not quite as solid and real and believable in the same way. Awareness is what brings self-understanding.

We're not trying to deny the personality in any way whatsoever. We have personalities due to conditioning from the time we were born—all the influences that have impacted us over time give rise to our personality. So the personality isn't so much the problem as the way the view forms around it, held together by clinging, by confusion.

We're really asking the question: Who am I when I'm not bound by these habitual egoic patterns of mind? Who am I? Who am I then?

What gets expressed then? What comes through then?

This is from Ajahn Sumedho, one of our elders, sharing his practice on working with personality:

"I used to make it a practice to play with personality rather than merely trying to let go of it. To think 'I've got to get rid of my personality and not attach to my emotions' is one of the ways we grasp the teachings of the Buddha. Instead, I would become a personality quite intentionally so I could listen to and observe this sense of me and mine.

"I would practice bringing up thoughts: 'Me? What about me? Don't you care about me? Aren't you interested in what I think and how I feel?' And: 'These are my things. This is my robe. These are my possessions. This is my bowl. This is my space. This is my view, my thoughts, my feelings, and my rights. I am Ajahn Sumedho. I am Maha Thera. I am the disciple of Luang Por Chah.' And on and on like that." He'd actually let it come up. "This is what makes me an interesting person, a person that has titles and is respected and admired in society.

"I would listen to that. I would listen not to knock it down or criticize it, but to recognize the power of words and how I could create myself." Isn't it beautiful? He said, "I want to know how I create this sense of myself." And he says, "As I did this, I would more and more find the refuge in awareness rather than in the conditions of my personality—rather than in the fears or self-disparagement or megalomania or whatever else happened to be operating in consciousness."

He was seeing with wisdom. So we're not trying to erase the personality, just to see it for what it is: a conditioned realm that is always changing. Always changing. How many times have you changed today? How many times have you changed in the week, in the month, in the year? Who are you? Who do you take yourself to be?

Mindfulness is what breaks up the identification. When we ground through the breath, through the body, we know what's happening with our thoughts, our feelings, emotions, sensations. Knowing—this is what brings us self-understanding. We watch the attitude of our mind, whether we're clinging, or whether we're resisting, pushing away, cutting off, holding on, building up. We can know this. We can see that the conditions come and go. They're not solid. Not permanent.

This beautiful refrain from the Buddha in the Majjhima Nikāya, where he says: "Seen as it actually is with proper wisdom—this is not mine, this I am not, this is not myself." Over and over again, this is repeated. "This is not mine"—body, feelings, perceptions, conceptions, consciousness. "This I am not. This is not myself."

Who am I when I am not bound by these habitual patterns of mind?

This is from the Dhammapada, verse three, in Gil Fronsdal's translation:

The mind, hard to see, subtle,
alighting where it wishes.
The sage protects.
The watched mind brings happiness.

The sage protects.

The watched mind brings happiness.

When things start to break up, when the identification begins to dissolve, sometimes this can become quite scary. We can feel like there's nothing there, nothing to hold us, as we start to touch the empty nature of self. This can be hard sometimes. And it's really a time when our faith in the teachings, in the practice, in the teachers, needs to be quite intact. We need that faith as this breaking up of identity view begins to happen.

And this isn't only at a certain stage of our practice. This can happen at many different stages, because there are many, many different dimensions and layers to this construction of how self gets formed. We encounter it in different ways at different times. Yet we have more and more resources to support us, more wisdom and understanding to hold us as this begins to happen.

At other times, when the momentum of "me" slows down, what we find can be quite surprising. We may discover that we actually experience more space. We start to feel more open. Things begin to open up. The breath becomes more free—we breathe more freely. The five senses become more alive. There's more contact with sights and smells and tastes. There's a kind of aliveness or vitality that we begin to come into contact with.

The conditions of the five skandhas are still there. There's still a body, still feelings, perceptions, conceptions, consciousness. But there's not a problem. It's not a problem. The formations are still

there—even a sense of me, this me-ness is still present—but there's a kind of lightness, a sense of less solidity, less separateness. And we're not empowering the habits in the same way. Awareness pokes holes, and it starts to feel like there are gaps in this habitual sense of self.

And it's this which allows for something wholly new to shine through—something very surprising, very unexpected—when we aren't caught in the old conditioned ideas. Something very new can come through.

Teacher Tsoknyi Rinpoche says, "With mindfulness, the string of thought that ties confusion together is suddenly no longer tying anything together, and the confusion naturally falls apart." Nothing's tying it together anymore—the clinging, the identification. And he says, "The qualities of the heart are the afterglow."

The qualities of the heart are the afterglow.

One yogi came in the other day and said in her reflection, in this connection with this truth, "You know, I don't have to respond with faith. Faith is here. I don't have to respond with compassion. I am compassion. Compassion is here. I don't have to do anything with it. I don't have to make it into anything. It's already here. I don't have to carry it. It's here."

This revelation—that this is what's flowing through. You remember in my earlier talk I said we don't have to carry all this. Take the luggage off your head. You're already on the train. Let go. Open up. It's here.

But until we know this, we practice. We practice compassion, metta, faith. We practice patience until patience is here, until we know patience is flowing effortlessly, spontaneously. Until we are respectful of what we see in our experience, we practice respect.

We practice kindness until we know that kindness is here.

And as the force of identification grows weaker, as the "I" becomes less demanding, we begin to smell the perfume of selflessness—this beautiful aroma of selflessness pervading this space, this boundless space.

Thanissara Bhikkhuni says that self-identification ultimately dies away, and what is left is limitless freedom.

Let's sit.

The mind, hard to see, subtle, alighting where it wishes. The sage protects. The watched mind brings happiness.

So remembering, as you're getting up and doing your walking: you don't have to get rid of anything. You don't have to get rid of anything. Just know what's there.

Thank you.

Sakkāya-diṭṭhi: Who Do I Take Myself To Be?

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