Identity and Identification

Will Kabat-Zinn · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2010) · 57:10

Good evening.

Tonight I'd like to speak about identity formation and reformation. Some of you have been here for nearly six weeks. Others, close to three months. From meeting with you individually and from some of the questions this morning, there seems to be a sense that certain aspects of self, certain dimensions of identity, are re-emerging—and sometimes feeling unwelcome.

When we are doing deep practice for a sustained period of time, we often get a little break from some aspects of our experience, particularly those that have to do with the social realm, the realm of self in relationship. Even though we have a full week left of retreat, it sounds like certain thought patterns and feelings are arising that perhaps haven't come up for a while. Maybe a sense of wanting to be paid attention to, to be noticed. Maybe a sense of fear around having to deal with other people's energies. Maybe a reemergence of judging.

What I've gotten a sense of is that for many of you there is some aversion to this. A sense of, "Oh, I kind of hoped that wouldn't come back. I thought maybe I was done with that."

Part of the reason the end of a retreat is such an auspicious time is that we've developed a very powerful continuity of mindfulness and concentration. As some of these patterns emerge toward the end, there's an opportunity to meet them in a new way.

It's interesting to notice that we can go along breathing in, breathing out, sensations in the body rising and passing away, feelings arising and passing away, moods and emotions moving through, coming and going, thoughts in the mind—and yet somehow there are certain ones that we stick to. We can be quite equanimous with all this coming and going for weeks or months. Night after night in these teachings you've been hearing of non-interference, that it doesn't matter what's arising, only our relationship to it. And then all of a sudden, it's different. It feels different. Something arises that feels like, "No, this is me."

So let's explore again, perhaps as a refresher or an encouragement: What is this process of identification with momentary experience, and how does it transform into an experience of identity? "This is me. This is who I am."

You're sitting, maybe in the dining hall, and you notice that you're judging everybody around you. For weeks you haven't been paying attention to anybody, but all of a sudden nobody else is doing anything right. Moving too slowly, taking too much food, taking too little food. There's contact with the sense door of seeing. A feeling arises—unpleasant or neutral, in this case probably unpleasant. Then the thought

arises, whatever the judgment is: "This person is such a..." And the thought isn't seen clearly with mindfulness. So there's an identification with this thought, and believing it leads to a becoming. We become the judger.

This is an interesting process. Subtle, but you can kind of feel it. Sometimes I have to act it out physically to express it. It can happen in a moment with any kind of experience—there's an identification, and then a movement into becoming. Becoming the sad one, or becoming the hopeless one, or becoming the judging one. It really is a kind of birth in the moment.

I had this experience very clearly on the bus in San Francisco. I live in the Bay Area, and I was sitting on the bus, actually on my way to teach a class—so perhaps a little extra mindful. Not mindful enough, as it turned out. Somebody gets on the bus, on their cell phone, talking extremely loudly. Yelling, if I do say so myself.

And it was so loud. Now, I'm quite tolerant of people talking on their cell phones—it really bothers some people—but of course, they sat down in the seat directly opposite from me, just an aisle between us. And I got into this whole internal monologue about this person. I was really in it: how people should not do this, it's not okay, it's unbelievably inconsiderate, absolutely no awareness of others. I was really in this battle, all taking place inside me, of course.

And at that moment, there was a momentary resurgence of mindfulness, which I think is the fruit of practice. The chances are that it will kick in sooner the more you're practicing. So thankfully, there was a moment of mindfulness. I just asked this question: what's happening? And I traced back—not consciously, almost intuitively—right back to the feeling tone. It was a very unpleasant feeling tone.

As I hung out with that feeling tone for just a moment, my whole experience shifted. It was just an unpleasant feeling. All of a sudden I noticed I was aware of the other people on the bus, of the scenery moving by outside. I could hear sounds again. I hadn't noticed any of these things for the few minutes before that. The difference was striking.

I realized it was a very clear example of how I really took birth in this. I was born into an identity of the irritated one. And as soon as I was born like that, I was in exclusive relationship with this woman, totally locked into it. In the settling back into just what's happening—just the feeling tone of it, out of the story—that relationship dissolved. Just a momentary experience, unpleasant. Then there was this sense of freedom.

Of course, I could have then said something. I didn't need to, and I actually appreciated what had happened. But it would have had a totally different tone than if I had said it a minute before. That wouldn't have been good.

So it's just an interesting process to watch, this moment-to-moment experience. All of you have enough mindfulness, enough continuity to notice this: just one experience after another, arising, arising. And then

there's one that has a stickiness, and then there's a birth into an identity.

One way of noticing this, which I find useful—I really think of this as moment-to-moment rebirth. As Andrea was talking a few nights ago about dependent origination, this is that. Moment-to-moment rebirth, born into a momentary incarnation.

It's interesting because that incarnation really has a different body. You can notice that when you're in a moment of embarrassment. If you're not just mindful of the feeling but you become the embarrassed one, there's a very clear difference. The body totally changes. And then when you're born into that identity, you have to live out that incarnation: old age, sickness, and death. Remember that list? Sorrow, lamentation, all those good things—until the death of that incarnation. And then maybe there's just noticing for a while, until the next one. Or there's another one immediately.

I notice this with fear a lot. Fear arises, and there's quite a distinction between just noticing fear—letting it be there fully, okay, fear—and taking birth as the afraid one. It has a center to it. And then that afraid one is in relationship to the threatening or scary others.

So it's just an interesting question: What does it mean to not take birth?

Not take birth in a limited identity in a moment. Sometimes people seem scary. "Oh, would I disappear?" No. It's very interesting to play with—when some identity view does not appear, some limited sense of me, there's a lot more room, a lot more available.

On hearing this, our natural inclination is not just to ask the question but then to try not to take birth. We're really good at trying to do things and trying not to do things. But that's not really useful, because we're taking birth all the time in these limited identities based on what's happening—just causes and conditions coming together, and we identify with it.

But actually, this is a really rich ground for insight. Not just when you see something and don't identify with it, but when you do identify with it. You're really coming to understand this mechanism experientially. And as you consciously take birth again and again, moment after moment—or you can just reflect on how many different incarnations you've had in the past hour, or five minutes, or day—when we allow ourselves to consciously be there for it: "Oh, this is what it's like to be the self-conscious one," or the "notice me please" identity. And then five minutes later it's "I'm the center of the universe, everybody loves me, I love everyone." And then it's "I hate everyone." They happen so differently—it's kind of amazing.

We stop believing so wholeheartedly in the reality of any one of these incarnations. It's quite liberating. You actually don't have to prevent yourself from taking birth. There's a lightness that just naturally starts to happen around all of it. It's not so personal.

Sometimes we take on a certain kind of identity because we're practitioners, or we're identifying with

some of the—quote unquote—positive, wholesome mind states which arise, maybe which arise here. And you're certainly hearing a lot about them from the teachers: loving-kindness, mudita, compassion. You may feel these at times quite strongly, and it can be easy for us to start to identify with those. "Oh, now I'm a yogi. I'm a loving person. All beings—let's liberate them. Everybody's so wholesome here."

And then somebody walks by and there's just a ruthless judgment. Cut.

And then there's an identity crisis. "Wait a minute. I'm a loving person. Haven't I been practicing that for months or years? I'm a terrible yogi. This is just a sign that I'm never going to change. I'm always going to be that person that I've always been."

It's interesting to notice this: one part of the mind looking at another. The really wholesome me looking at the really petty me. And there's a conflict.

But this practice is not about being any kind of person. If love is there, wonderful. But we can also build a me out of that. We can build a me out of insight. We can build a me around an experience of selflessness. It's amazing. And you can just watch the mind do it.

Oh, and the Buddha, you know, in the discourses, there are some great suttas where the Buddha talks about people saying, "I am at peace. I'm very selfless. I have realized Nibbana." And the Buddha points out there's still some clinging here. The idea is not to build an identity around any experience. That's where freedom lies.

There's a capacity aspect of what we are that actually holds all of the opposites, all the paired opposites—liking and not liking, loving and hating, joy and sadness. All these things that we, in our ordinary experience, like to pair against each other. Either I'm nice or I'm not nice. And in that kind of thinking, it has to be one. Which one is it? But what about the mind that holds both equally and isn't either?

So this is something to look for in your own experience over these next days. It's really exciting, I think, that all of these habits of mind reemerge. They may not all reemerge, but some do. It's wonderful. It's a ground for real practice. And a big shift happens when you can start to get happy about seeing patterns in the mind, clinging, identification. It's a kind of Dharma joy in just, "Wow, look at that. How did that happen?"

Even just watching, you can watch the movement of mind. I remember having a very powerful experience sitting with a teacher once. They were talking to a group, and I noticed there was something in me pulling for their attention. It was like leaning, trying to get it. And for some reason, the mind was very still that day. I could see that movement so clearly, it was just very obvious. And just in the seeing of it, this great settling back, and this great spaciousness there. It was clear there's no need to go anywhere, get anything.

So in a way, I'd really just invite you—and this is the same instruction you've been hearing again and

again—to really meet what's arising with interest and the quality of investigation. Not to figure out, but just to watch identity being formed. This is the core of the Buddhist teaching. This is where it all happens, freedom and bondage, just in these moments.

We all have our favorites in terms of what we like to identify with as me—our top ten me things or stories. So you can just maybe notice one or a few of them that come up a lot in these next days and just pay attention to that.

I'm going to say something twice now because I think it's important. Freedom does not depend on something not being there. It's so deeply ingrained that we think there's something happening that needs to not be here in order for me to be free. Whether it's judgments, whether it's an emotion, a feeling, whether it's an energy block—it's just so deeply ingrained that that needs to go before freedom can be there. But it's not true. It's only in the identification with it and the grasping that bondage is created.

We have a prison then of certain dimensions. And it could be a big, spacious prison. It could be a nice prison, like "I'm very loving" or "I'm a really generous person." That's sort of like a high-class prison. It's one of those minimum security places where you have a couch and unlimited TV and it's comfortable. Or—and this could change from moment to moment, it's not like you only have one—you can have a really hardcore maximum security prison. "I'm worthless" or "I'll never amount to anything" in a moment. "I'm unworthy. Something's fundamentally wrong with me." That's like really...

You get none of the comforts in that prison. But it has its advantages, that one. The motivation for escape is quite high. In the high-class prison, less motivation.

The thing about these prisons, though, is that the bars are illusory. They actually have no substance. I want to illustrate the fact that it's not a substantial thing keeping us in prison—this is an important point. But when I say "just illusory," it almost seems like, well, why not just walk out then? And as you all know, it doesn't work that way.

But through seeing, these bars can fall away. Or it doesn't matter that they're there, because there's no one behind them. I'm not located inside.

So we have all kinds of identities. We have roles that we play in our lives. We have career—I'm a lawyer, or I'm a carpenter, or I'm a plumber, or I'm a doctor, or I'm a teacher. Mother, father, son, daughter, brother, sister. And there's nothing wrong with that. It's good to know what your role is in the moment. There are also momentary identities—it's good for us to remember that. If I go home and I'm the teacher, it's not so good. That's not the role with my wife or with my son. It could be in moments.

Even just thinking of these identities, where do they exist? Just in this moment, where do all these identities exist? They exist as memory, experientially as a thought in the mind. They're not here. Without thinking about the past in this moment, without imagining a future in this moment—what is here? Who are you?

You didn't disappear, did you? But there may not be a sense of "me" in the conventional way, the ordinary way.

It's interesting, even personality-wise or persona—sometimes you have a persona, sometimes you have different personas. There's one way with one group of people, another way with another group. And it's interesting, I read this once and I hope it's true, that the root of the word "persona" has a Greek root, and it has something to do with peering through. It had to do with the masks that actors wore in those old Greek plays. There's a peering through the mask. The mask could change. It's not your identity.

And as I think of these roles, these conventional roles that we identify with, or even persona—they don't need to go away. But it's a question of knowing, remembering: this is not what we are. This is not who we are in any ultimate way. We can't be contained by any of these identities. They're so limited. And what we are is vast, much vaster.

And you might even notice, in moments of not identifying as a this or a that, there's still something here. Maybe calling it a "thing" might not even be right. But there's a lot more available in terms of resources, choices.

In fact, it's hard to describe, but all of a sudden so much more is available. Freedom of movement, freedom of action, freedom of expression.

We can become very identified with some of the states that arise in long-term meditation. We can get very identified with concentration, attached to it. And as the container changes, it can be kind of disconcerting. But the freedom that the Buddha was talking about does not depend on any conditions.

So in a way, I guess the way I hold these retreats—even if it's a long retreat, like a three-month retreat—when we're following this path, we need to have a very, very long view. It's useful, a long-term view. And it's not that freedom resides at the end of this long-term view. It's that I think over time, the practice, rather than being something discrete that we do just at special times and circumstances like retreat, becomes a way of living, a way of being. And the form changes. Sometimes it's silent and structured retreat. Sometimes you're fully in the world. But the practice fundamentally doesn't change at all. And the question is: are we really using what's arising for our own liberation? Are we choosing to look?

It's very useful that the shape changes, because then new stuff arises that we haven't had a chance to look at.

There's a discourse in the Middle-Length Discourses of the Buddha, sort of a funny discourse, I think, where there's this wealthy laywoman, Mistress Vedika. She is known throughout the town for being kind, and she has a very good reputation. Her servant, named Kali, is suspicious of this reputation. She thinks to herself, "My mistress doesn't get angry much. But I wonder if that's because there's no anger in her, or if it's just because I always do my work really well and come on time. I wonder what would happen if I

didn't do my work so well and didn't come on time. I wonder how kind and patient she'd be then."

So the next day, she woke up late and came in, and Mistress Vedika kind of laid into her—she was upset and yelled at her. Kali says, "Aha, there's some anger in there." The next day she gets up even later, and Mistress Vedika is even more upset. The following day, she gets up even later still. When Mistress Vedika asks her, "Why did you get up late?" she says, "Oh, is anything wrong? No, nothing's wrong." She's not apologizing.

So this third time, Mistress Vedika flies into a rage and takes a rolling pin and whacks her on the head with it. And Kali is cut, and she runs out into the town announcing to everybody that Mistress Vedika is not as kind as her reputation suggests—I think one of the words she uses is "merciless."

Part of the message in the story is that there are certain habits of mind that don't arise when the conditions are favorable, when they're a particular way. In the teaching, they call these the latent defilements. And we can all kind of empathize with Mistress Vedika, I think. There are these moments: "Where did that come from?"

So get happy about seeing these things. That's the path. The path is not somewhere else. When you're seeing unfreedom, you're working towards freedom. If you're somebody whose servant is always coming on time, you never get to see that you have this anger.

So it's wonderful that conditions are changing like this. We get to see all these places where we identify and get stuck. And we begin to have a chance to get free, to identify less.

In some other traditions, they sort of change things up on you on purpose to bring out these attachments.

What you find is you don't even need to do that. If you're just sitting with reality for long enough, you know, we cling to this, we cling to that. Because things are impermanent, reality works on your preferences plenty. We just start to let go naturally because we simply can't make things the way we want them in the world, even in our own minds.

I remember early on in my practice, I often felt like I was building something up—building concentration. It was almost like building a house of cards. Really precarious, and you're kind of trying, and then it would all fall apart. Interestingly, when it all fell apart, that's when meditation happened. It was just, "Oh, I can't control my mind." Then all of a sudden, it's just what's happening.

This happens over and over again in various ways as we practice. Reality working on us. As long as we're in touch with what is, the path is unfolding. Our intuitive wisdom recognizes we're clinging and we're suffering from the clinging, so we're naturally letting go.

In some of these other traditions—I sat a number of retreats with a Chan master from Taiwan named Sheng Yen. Chan is the Chinese Zen. He passed away not too long ago, but he had this fierceness about changing things up on you and not letting you settle into a comfortable place.

I was reading in his autobiography about how when he was with his first master, his master said, "Okay, you can stay in this room here in the temple." As soon as he got his stuff all organized, his master said, "You know what? Why don't you stay in this bigger room? There's a library there." He was a scholar. "You can study. You'll have a lot of time to read." So he moves all his stuff into that room. Later that day, the master says, "You know what? On second thought, actually, I think it'd be better if you're in the first room." He goes back to the first room. And then the next day: "Actually, you really should study. I want you to be a scholar. I want you to produce good things for the temple." He's there for a couple hours. "We're having a guest coming. You better move to the other room."

And he argued with his master. The way he describes it, he said as soon as he let go, the master stopped moving him.

We can all relate to this. Sometimes this insight is happening on the subtle level. Sometimes it's happening in this very concrete way—just moving rooms—but it's doing the same thing. We're naturally getting less identified with a particular condition, less dependent on it, less needing to land anywhere, not needing to abide in any one place.

Just a little anecdote about Master Sheng Yen: I had this experience on a retreat that I thought was really something. And I told him about it. And he said, "What you experienced was thought farting."

Let go.

This is a very precious time, and I just encourage you to really make use of it. Not in a tight, striving way. Holding this long-term view is, I think, just more correct. But just in the simple way of being curious, interested in

in what's happening here. All of the freedom, all of the understanding—it just comes out of that.

I have a great poster I saw once. It's got one of these beautiful Zen circle paintings, a beautiful *ensō*, and it says: "Never forget the thousand-year view."

Let's just sit for a moment.

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