Papañca, Part 1

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Joseph Goldstein · 1:33:49

I'd like to begin by referring back to something that Bart mentioned this morning. It's a phrase from the Buddhist discourse on mindfulness, the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. There's one line in it which has a very interesting instruction, where the Buddha says, "Be mindful that 'there is a body' to the extent necessary for clear knowing and continuous mindfulness."

Just that phrase—"be mindful that there is a body"—suggests that it could be used as a kind of mental label or note in the mind to remind us to come back to awareness of the body. I've been using that phrase in teaching now for quite a few years, and people have found it very helpful because we can frame the sitting this way: as we sit down and assume a comfortable but alert posture, we can simply begin with "there is a body," settling into that and using it as the framework for then becoming aware of whatever else arises.

For example, when we begin to open to the feeling of the breath, instead of necessarily narrowing the focus on the breath or zeroing in on it, we could hold the larger frame of "there is a body" and then become aware of the breath, the feeling of the breath arising within that larger frame. It's as if we're giving our mind, or creating, greater spaciousness—but that spaciousness includes awareness of whatever arises within it.

So we use the phrase "there is a body," we settle in, and then become mindful of everything that's arising within that framework: sounds, thoughts, or other sensations. We keep that larger framework, and you can experiment with times when perhaps you do zero in on the breath, or not.

Find a comfortable place, an alert meditative posture. Sit in the way that's most comfortable for you with respect to whether your eyes are closed or just slightly open with a downward gaze. Some techniques of meditation keep the eyes wide open. Generally, we don't do that in Vipassana, but it could be done. You can experiment with that as well and see what is most conducive to staying mindful, because that's the point of it all.

Settle back into a comfortable posture, maybe repeating the phrase in the mind: "there is a body." You can repeat that phrase throughout the sitting at different times. We settle into the feeling of the whole body, the sitting posture.

As Bart mentioned this morning, we settle in, relaxing the eyes, relaxing the jaw, relaxing the belly—because these are often places where we're holding. Soften the eyes, soften the jaw. Just as an aside, the jaw often relaxes if we place our tongue just behind the upper teeth, at the palate. I've found that this

automatically relaxes the jaw. Something to play with. And relaxing the belly.

Within that framework, become aware of any sounds that may be appearing. One of the things you may notice as you settle in within this frame—"there is a body"—and then open to sounds, is that you may begin to have the experience that there's really no division between inside and outside. The feeling of the body and sounds are just all appearing in this open space of the mind.

Stay relaxed, not waiting for anything, not wanting anything. We simply settle back into that field—"there is a body"—aware of whatever sounds may appear and come and go. And when there are no sounds, being aware of the silence.

Within that framework, you may become aware of the sensations of the body breathing. There's no need to particularly zero in on the breath, although one could. But it might be interesting for a while to stay in the larger framework and simply be with the sensations of the body breathing in the context of "there is a body," keeping that larger frame.

As you feel the sensations of the body breathing, you may notice where in the body those sensations are felt most clearly. And occasionally, to the degree that it's helpful, you can repeat the phrase "there is a body." It just reminds us to settle back into that awareness, being mindful of whatever arises within that framework.

Sounds, the sensations of the body breathing. There may be other sensations in the body that appear. Be open to the feeling of those sensations—some pleasant, perhaps some unpleasant. We're just open to the experience of them within this framework: there is a body.

Also become aware of any thoughts or images that appear. See how alert you can be to the arising, to the appearance of thoughts or images in the mind, seeing how they too come and go, very much like sounds. Settling into the experience of "there is a body," perhaps using that phrase occasionally, and being mindful of whatever arises within that frame. Sounds come and go. The sensations of the body breathing. Other sensations that we may feel in the body. Thoughts or images. The key is being relaxed and alert at the same time.

When you're ready, you can slowly, gently open your eyes, and also then become mindful of seeing. Seeing is an underappreciated field for mindfulness, even though we're living largely in the world of what's being seen—for people who have functioning eyesight—and yet I think very often we're not mindful that we're seeing. But that's a whole other topic.

For today's topic, as some of you may know from the course description that was online, I just finished a three-month home retreat. The practice is very alive and vibrant for me in these days. And as always, this retreat highlighted the challenge that we face as lay practitioners living in the world: how can we integrate the Buddhist teachings on liberation, on enlightenment—the highest aspirations we might have—how can we integrate those teachings in the busyness, the samsaric nature of our life in the world?

This is the great challenge for us.

In this talk, I'd like to jump into the deeper end of things. Some of the ideas and concepts will be familiar to some of you, and perhaps for others they may be new ideas, even challenging ones. I would suggest just taking it all in, seeing what's useful for you now, and if there are things you don't quite understand or are uncertain about, let them be seeds which in their own time may or may not germinate.

At first, the framework of understanding that I'm going to lay out may sound somewhat theoretical, abstract, or disconnected from the nitty-gritty of one's life. But if you can hang in there as I lay all of this out, I think you'll begin to see the tremendous practical applications of this particular teaching. It's not about Buddhist philosophy. The Buddha simply analyzed things, understood the nature of the mind and body and our interactions in the world with such clarity. He understood things on so many different levels, but they're all in the service of coming to the end of suffering. That's really what it's all about. And it has that kind of practical implication for us in our lives.

So often our inquiries—we might say our spiritual inquiries, perhaps even before we knew anything about Buddhism—revolve around the question: who am I? This is a basic existential question. It may be a really conscious reflection, or it may just be a background, almost subliminal motivation in our searching. Who am I?

I had a very striking experience of that. This goes back many years, when I was in the Peace Corps in Thailand. I was about twenty-one years old, with all the seeking and searching and angst of being that age. I remember one time I was teaching at this school in Bangkok. I was in my room, looking in the mirror, and just desperately wanting to know: who's behind what I'm seeing? The question was very important and meaningful for me, even though at that time I had no idea how to investigate it.

But this "who"—who am I—can actually be misleading as the core question of our inquiry. Because just in that way of formulating it, "who am I," it's already predicating the idea of a self, a being, someone, some unchanging core self behind all our experience, who's at the center of our lives. Just the word "who" already has that implication. I think it sets us off in the wrong direction for the most part. There's a better question that would serve us, but before I get to that, a little sidebar.

Conventionally speaking, of course we can use that language. If somebody asks you, "Who's coming to dinner?" they're not interested in a deep philosophical analysis of mind factors and body elements. "Carrie's coming to dinner." Conventionally speaking, this language is fine. But from a Dharma perspective, if it's not rightly understood, this view of "who," this imaginary who, the view of self, is really at the core, at the center of the suffering in our lives. So even though we use that language conventionally, which is fine, from a Dharma perspective we can dig deeper. We can get underneath that to really see what's going on.

This is really important, and it was expressed beautifully by a writer named Wei Wu Wei. He was a

European who lived for a long time in Hong Kong and had some kind of realization—his books are filled with little stories and aphorisms that highlight the understanding of selflessness. Here is one of his little aphorisms: "Being attached to the view of self is like a dog barking up a tree that isn't there."

For most of us, this is our lives. We're barking up a tree that isn't there.

So the question is, when are we going to stop barking? Well, we can stop barking when we understand. We go from the "who" to the "what." What am I, rather than who am I? And that begins to open us up to a whole profound investigation of the nature of this mind and body without it being predicated beforehand on the notion of a self or an "I" or some being. That's why this change of language can be very impactful in our inquiry.

So what are we? What are the building blocks of all our experience? And then, once we understand what the building blocks are, the next very important question is: What do we build with them? What do we do? What kind of reality do we construct for ourselves out of the basic building blocks of our experience? This is a lot of what I want to go into in this talk.

So what is the "what"? That's the question. The Buddha offered some very simple ways of understanding the basic elements of our experience. And then, with somewhat more complexity, he described the myriad things we do with these building blocks. Some of these things lead to more suffering in our lives, more stress; and some of the things we do with these building blocks lead to greater ease and greater freedom. Understanding things on this deeper level really has tremendous implications for how we're living and how we're experiencing life.

There is one discourse of the Buddha which has a very bold title. The title of the discourse is "The All." And the Buddha describes "the All" in like a few sentences—or one long sentence. It's quite remarkable that he encapsulated the All in this very short little discourse. So what is the All? The eye and visible objects, the ear and sounds, the nose and smells, the tongue and tastes, the body and tactile sensations, and the mind and all mental activities—thoughts, emotions, different mind states. This is the All. And he challenged his audience: Can anyone express something in their experience that's outside of these six things?

It's quite amazing. We think our lives are so complicated, but really only six things are ever happening. It's sights or sounds or smells or tastes or sensations or some kind of mental activity. Moment after moment, we're just experiencing these six things.

The image that sometimes comes to mind is that our life is like a six-piece chamber orchestra. It's just six different instruments playing and interrelating with one another. That's all that's happening—this chamber orchestra of the six senses. And in Buddhism, the mind is included as the sixth sense. These six senses, this chamber orchestra, is playing the music of our lives. So what kind of music are we creating?

But here is where it gets interesting and a little more complex. Because how the mind is relating to these six experiences, how we're relating, becomes itself part of the unfolding of our lives. It's not only

recognizing these six things, but actually going deeper into the mental field to see: How is the mind—and by mind, it also includes heart, the heart-mind—how is this heart-mind relating to these different sense impressions? And of course, as we know, there can be a lot of complexity in how we relate to our experience.

The Buddha talked of three powerfully conditioned tendencies in the mind. In Pali, which is the language a lot of the Buddhist texts are in, an ancient Indian language, it's called *papañca*. Papañca means the proliferating tendencies of mind—those ways of relating to things that just proliferate a whole world of interaction. They're very powerful forces, basic forces in the mind that are playing out all the time, but that mostly we're unaware of. Unless we're really looking carefully at how things are unfolding and have this conceptual framework to begin with, we probably wouldn't even know how to differentiate these three proliferating tendencies.

In this talk, I wanted to go a little deeper and really explore what these three proliferating tendencies are and how they work. Because it's this papañca, this proliferation in the mind, which is both rooted in and further strengthens the sense of self. These tendencies play a very critical role in how the notion of self, the idea, the concept of self, is both created and strengthened and embedded in our life stream.

So, the three papañca.

The three proliferating tendencies are these: the first is craving, the second is conceit, and the third is wrong view. I'll be talking about each one of these in turn.

To start with a very simple explanation: as we know, craving is something we're all familiar with. It's that wanting or desire or thirsting for something. And it's rooted in the sense of mine, of belonging to me. We want things to belong to us, or we take them to be ours.

Let me share one little story which shows both this craving for wanting things to be mine and also the rapidity of the proliferating tendency. It's a rather ridiculous story, but it's true. I was on retreat at the Forest Refuge, and I'd been there for some time. My practice felt like it was really deepening, and I was reflecting on the Four Noble Truths. As many of you know, there's the truth of suffering, dukkha; the cause of it, which is craving; the end of dukkha, which is the end of craving; and the path.

I was thinking about this and said, "Yeah, the end of suffering is the end of craving." So I said to myself, "Joseph, just stop craving. Stop wanting. Come to the end of suffering." It seemed so simple. And then immediately—maybe ten seconds after I had that thought, "just stop craving"—I noticed I was wearing my favorite meditation sweatshirt. We all probably have our little meditative clothing, and I have a favorite sweatshirt. Every time I'm on retreat, this is what I wear.

Going from "yeah, just stop craving," within about thirty seconds I started imagining I'd like to get this sweatshirt in a lot of different colors, because the one I have is only gray. My mind started proliferating, and within a minute or so I just had to laugh at myself. But that's what proliferation means—we have a

thought and it just expands into our whole world. So that's craving, based or rooted in the sense of mine, of belonging to me, of wanting something to belong to me.

The second of the tendencies is conceit. This is the English translation of the Pali word *mana*. I want to give the Pali words for some of these terms because sometimes, when I'm recognizing different forces in the mind, I like to use the Pali word. For me, it depersonalizes the experience. The Pali word doesn't carry the same baggage, you might say, that certain English words might carry. So that's why I offer this basic Pali terminology—just to become a little familiar with it.

Conceit is the English translation of *mana*, and it means something a little different than how we use the word conceit in English. In English, when we say somebody's conceited, we think they're very full of themselves and believe they're better than others. That's one small aspect of what's meant by *mana*. But more fundamentally, *mana* is the felt sense or felt impression of "I am." It's "I am this"—that's the conceit. When I looked up conceit in the dictionary, I found that conceit can also mean simply the idea or belief about something. So conceit here means that feeling of "I am."

In this regard, years ago I saw an ad for a t-shirt in the New York Times. The logo on the shirt simply said: "Me, me, me." That's an expression of *mana*—"I am, I'm here."

So craving is that thirst for something rooted in mine or belonging to me. Conceit is that deeply conditioned feeling which we all have of "I am."

And then the third of the proliferating tendencies is wrong view. Wrong view within the Buddhist context is the view or belief in some self—the belief or idea of an unchanging core being that somehow is within us or is us. This belief in self, as we all know, is simply how the world and people commonly understand themselves. This is, in a way, the commonsense understanding of who we are—of course there's a self, of course there's a me.

But the Buddha—and this is where the teachings are in some way very radical and sometimes challenging—the Buddha challenges these conventional beliefs. He's saying that wrong view is holding or being attached to this view of self.

In this and in later talks, I'm going to explore this a little bit more. But I wanted to just give this basic outline of the papañca, the three proliferating tendencies of the mind: craving, conceit, and wrong view.

In the Buddhist teachings, these three are usually expressed in what is kind of a stock phrase that you find throughout the different discourses when the Buddha is talking about the workings of this papañca. It's a very simple set of phrases: "This is mine. This I am. This is myself." Those phrases just encapsulate these three papañca. "This is mine" is craving. "This I am" is conceit. "This is myself" is wrong view.

It's helpful to distinguish among these tendencies because until we've really applied the conceptual framework directly and investigated practically in our own experience, we might have some basic

conceptual understanding, but there may not be a refined differentiation between them. So I just want to explore that a little bit so we can perhaps more clearly see what each is and the difference among them.

It's important to do this. And the reason I wanted to devote both talks during this course to this topic is because these three tendencies, in different ways and mostly unknowingly—unless we really learn how to pay attention to them—are the ways we construct and strengthen the sense of self in our lives. These tendencies are at work a lot of the time, which I will go into a bit more. They are working. They're like the background motor of our lives. And if we're not aware of them, if we're not aware of how they're working, all the time they're strengthening, they're constructing and strengthening this sense of self.

The reason this is so important was expressed by the great Tibetan master Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche. He died some years ago. He was a great master really of the last century. This is what he wrote: "The idea of an enduring self has kept you wandering helplessly in samsara for countless past lifetimes. This idea of an enduring self is the very thing that now prevents you from liberating yourself and others from conditioned existence. If you could simply let go of that one thought of 'I,' you would find it easy to be free and to free others too."

So this is not just an intellectual exercise. This goes to the very heart, to the very root of what causes so much suffering for ourselves and others—this core notion of self.

We can begin to explore all of this in some of the very ordinary experiences of our lives. We don't have to be in some deep meditative state to begin to understand how all of this is working. We can begin to understand it and understand exactly what craving is, based on "mine" and "belonging to me," and what conceit is, based on "I am," this "I am-ing." We can really see this at work in how we understand the relationship we have to the body.

For example, in considering the body, we probably would not say, "I am the leg," or "the leg is me." We would say, "my leg," as if the leg is something that belongs to a me. So that's the first papañca—"mine," "belonging to me"—and then all the craving that can arise with things that belong to us. We want it to be this way or that way. There's a lot of desire that comes for things that belong to us.

And then we might extend that inquiry into how we feel about the whole body, how we relate to the whole body. When I was thinking about this in working on this talk, I thought, well, at first people might well think, "I am the body." What am I? I'm the body, at least in part. But then on further reflection, I was thinking about an experience I had, and I think it's very common to people as they get older, as they age. Because as we age, for myself and I think commonly, the feeling "I am" hasn't really changed. Even as we see the body so visibly change—the gray hair and the wrinkles and whatever, the whole aging process—we see the body changing, but don't you have that sense often? How did this happen? I feel the same. It's the same "I am," you know, thirty years ago.

So this begins to give an indication that even the way we relate to the whole body is not so much the

conceit "I am," but rather "mine." The body belongs to me. And again, when we consider the body in this way—the body belongs to me—so many different desires and cravings come about. How many of our desires and cravings are rooted in or coming from our experience of the body? The body belongs to me, the body is mine, and therefore I want this and this, and I want it to be like that.

So this is common. This is just the ordinary experiences of our lives. An extreme version of this, and the way we are usually relating to the body as being "mine," was expressed in one ad I saw in some magazine, advertising something desirable, I guess.

And, you know, it was this beautiful setting, and the caption was—there were people in the ad—and the caption read, "I don't let anything stand in the way of my pleasure." As if this is what we should aim for. This is what we should strive for. But it indicates a basic energy, even though that's an extreme version. This motivation in our lives may express itself in much more subtle fashion, not so dramatic.

But it points to something very interesting, a Dharma point well worth investigating, because there's a certain confusion that keeps reinforcing and strengthening the force of desire and craving in our lives. And that is: unexamined, we often equate desire and pleasure. Another ad I once saw, the caption was, "Increase your desire." Good Buddhist instruction! But this is part of our world, and that's the message we're constantly receiving, because it equates desire with pleasure itself. And we don't usually pay careful enough attention to times of desire to see the suffering embedded in it.

A phrase I've been using lately is "migraines of desire." Because like with a migraine, it's such a compelling force in the experience that just pushes us to relieve it. But it's suffering—migraine is suffering. Desire is like a migraine that's pushing us to get something. So it would be very helpful to begin to see the suffering embedded in desire. It might make it a little less attractive to us.

A practical way of doing this, which I've seen a lot in my own meditation and talked about extensively on meditation retreats—this could be done anytime, whether in meditation or not, but it's particularly visible or noticeable when we're in formal meditation. Just sit in your next sitting. Be watchful for the next time desire arises. Maybe it'll be in that sitting or the following one, but it probably won't be too long before some desire arises in the mind.

If you can be mindful, if you can really catch the arising—"Oh, there's desire in the mind"—and just be with it and feel what it's like to have the desire, then notice what it's like when the desire ends, which it always will. It'll be there for however long it's there. This is why sitting is particularly helpful, because we're not doing anything. We're not acting on it. We're just sitting with it and feeling it. With it, with it, and then at a certain point it goes. Notice how it feels when the desire leaves. My experience is it always feels like a huge relief. It feels like the mind, the heart is being let out of the grip of something. The desire is the grip.

But normally we don't see it, because on a more superficial level we're equating the desire with some kind

of pleasure—the anticipated pleasure of getting whatever it is we desire—but not seeing the migraine aspect of the desire itself. So this would be very helpful to really see for oneself. This is an application of these teachings. We're not just listening and hearing and maybe understanding to whatever extent we do on an intellectual, conceptual level. All of these teachings are to be applied as a basis for our own investigation.

And of course, we also take to be mine or belonging to me—rooted in different kinds of craving—not only things related to the body, but all of our minds. My thoughts, my feelings, my anger, my happiness. It's all belonging to me. You see how deeply rooted this way of relating to things is in our lives. This is not superficial conditioning. This is right down there in the roots of how we're living.

The whole point of the Buddhist teaching is to see: what are the ways in which we live and relate to experience that create more suffering? And what are the possibilities for freedom? That's what all of this is about.

I was thinking about this deeply rooted sense of possessiveness, of mine and belonging to me. The image that came to mind was of a bunch of kids playing with some toys. Maybe at some point one of the parents says to one of the kids, "Share the toys, share the toys with others." And occasionally there might come up against that heartfelt wail: "But it's mine!" And it's so young. This is very young. But it's deep.

And so our practice is really to get in there with it all and to see, just in the ordinary unfolding of our lives, how impactful these proliferating tendencies are. This is not some occasional thing that happens from time to time. They're driving forces in our lives. So we need to really explore and investigate.

The Buddha also talked about a more subtle kind of craving. He called it craving for becoming. When we believe this mind and body to be mine, then all kinds of cravings will arise for it to become like this or that, in whatever way. Instead of being totally settled back in things just as they are, there's often this leaning into the unfolding process of our lives. Instead of being settled and at rest and really complete in each moment, this craving for becoming has us leaning into how things are unfolding, rooted in craving, rooted in wanting.

One way of seeing this, which is very obvious in meditation, has to do with expectation. We may think we have no expectations, but we usually do. They may be a little hidden at first, but a good signal for this—and one that provides its own interesting insight—is to pay attention to those times in our practice and in our lives when we're struggling with something, when things are not flowing easily and we're just caught in some kind of struggle.

Usually we see this as a problem. It's not pleasant. The struggle is a kind of suffering. But more usefully, it's helpful to see struggle as a very important feedback rather than being a problem. Because struggle means just one thing: it means something is happening in our experience that we're not accepting. Because if we were accepting it, we wouldn't be struggling. It's so simple. I just love the teachings because

once one sees a lot of these things, in retrospect, they become so obvious. But of course, until we see them, we struggle.

Just for example, when you're struggling in your meditation practice—sitting and maybe your intention is to be with the breath, but then there's a lot of pain or discomfort in the body, or just a lot of thinking, lots and lots of thinking. We're trying to be with the breath, but the discomfort or the thinking keeps distracting us, and so we're in this struggle between the two. If we understand struggle as feedback, we ask the question, "Oh, what am I not accepting?" Oh, I'm not accepting the fact that there's discomfort in the body. Can I settle back and relax and open to it? Just be with it. At that point, it's not the breath that we should be with. It's to be with what's presenting itself, which in this case might be discomfort or even a lot of thoughts. Some sittings, for whatever reason, might just be a lot of thinking. Instead of struggling with that, let the struggle be the indication: "Oh, I'm not accepting this. I'm not settled." So we could just make a big frame, settle back, and become aware—oh, mind thinking, mind thinking. We can be mindful of that, and the struggle is gone. It might be different emotions. Okay.

So all of this is pointing to something very important. This whole discussion about craving, whether it's craving for the body to be a certain way or the craving for becoming in the way I described—the whole field of craving is rooted in one, we could almost say, hardwired tendency in our being. So it's very powerful. Desiring, craving is not a superficial conditioning; it goes really deep. And the root of it is that we want what's pleasant and we want to avoid what's unpleasant.

For most people, of course, this seems obvious. Well, of course—why shouldn't I want what's pleasant and avoid what's unpleasant? It just feels like, yes, this is normal, this is how it should be. The problem is that we can't control it. In all of our lives, we cannot completely control it, or even for the most part control it. Life is made up of this mix of pleasant and unpleasant. And if we're driven by this desire for the pleasant and desire to avoid the unpleasant, we are in a constant state of either defensiveness, trying to protect ourselves from what's unpleasant, or this obsessive energy of wanting or craving or becoming.

So it's really important to see this. The Buddha had very strong words about this, which whenever I hear this particular teaching, it kind of makes me sit up straight. He said that as long as there's desire for the pleasant, or attachment to the pleasant, and aversion to the unpleasant, liberation is impossible. That's a very powerful statement because it really points to what we need to practice, which is settling back with greater equanimity.

It doesn't mean we don't experience what's pleasant. But on the same token, it doesn't mean we don't experience what's unpleasant. It means that we have enough inner strength and resilience and equanimity just to settle back.

And then being aware of whatever arises within it. Some things will be pleasant, some things will be unpleasant. Can we just be with it? Can we experience unpleasantness? Fine. Pleasantness? Fine. So we're fully engaged. It's not a disengagement, but an evenness, a non-reactivity.

Now, this doesn't mean that in this place of openness and equanimity we don't respond to things appropriately. Of course we do. If your hand is on fire—unpleasant, unpleasant—no, put it out, take it out. This is just one example of a whole world of interactions we have. It doesn't mean that we don't respond. Rather, it means: what is driving the response? Is it just the reactivity of craving this or that? Or is it discernment? Is it really the operation of wisdom in our lives? And so the mind, even as it's responding—we take the hand out of the fire, we're responding to that situation—but the mind can be at peace with that, not caught up in great reactivity of mind. This is part of our practice: enlarging our capacity to hold this whole range of experience that comes to us as human beings in this life.

I've talked quite a lot now about the first aspect of papañca, which is craving born from this notion of "mine" or "belonging to me." The workings of the second aspect of papañca, of these proliferating tendencies, is conceit. These are a little more subtle and in some ways more pervasive.

Although conceit—*māna* within the Buddhist framework—very often refers to the comparing mind (I'm better than, I'm equal to, I'm less than), it also manifests as thoughts of "I am" over time. This is really interesting because it's a good part of our lives. What this means is the sense of not only "I am this now," but "I was"—I was this or that in the past, or I will be this or that in the future.

Just reflect for a moment. You'll probably know this from your meditation experience, but I'm going to speak more about how even more pervasive it is than that. How much time is spent in our minds in past and future? A huge amount of time. Just remembering things, memories, planning, imagining. Our minds are doing this all the time, and we're not seeing that in doing this, it is a manifestation of the conceit "I am." We are strengthening the "I am-ness," or "I am-ing." Not only in this moment, in relationship to what's happening, comparing ourselves with others, but over time—in the past, present, future. To the degree that we're lost, which we often are, in thoughts of past and future, unknowingly we are strengthening this conceit, this "I am."

Most generally, the conceit of *māna*, this underlying impression that we carry throughout the day of "I am-ness"—it's very often just the underlying backdrop to our whole days. I'm walking, I'm eating, I'm doing this, I'm doing that. We're not thinking that explicitly, but at least in my experience, there's often a felt sense that's there as the underlying understanding of what's happening. Yeah, I am, I'm doing this, I'm doing that. All of this is so ordinary that usually we don't take the time to investigate: what exactly is the "I" that we're talking about? Even though it's so pervasive and so common in how we are living our lives—I'm doing this, I'm doing that, I'm going here, I'm going there—how often do we actually stop and ask: well, what is the "I"? What is this thing that is running my life?

This is where the teachings and the meditation and the practice of mindfulness become the key to unlock this door. I'd like to give just a couple of examples of this. The first is a very simple one which illustrates the proliferating aspect of conceit and just how it can create whole worlds. The second example is about something a little more impactful in terms of the actual suffering in our lives.

So the first example also happened on this recent retreat. I was walking outside and it was a particularly cold day—freezing cold. I'm doing walking meditation and I'm so cold. That was my sense of it: "I'm so cold."

And although this could be a convenient way of communicating—if somebody said, "How are you feeling?" and you replied, "Oh, I feel so cold"—that would be fine. But that's just convention. A more fruitful investigation of the experience would be to get underneath that conceit. "I am so cold." Okay, what are the building blocks here? Going to: "Oh, there is coldness. Unpleasant." Where we just get to the basic elements of the experience.

But instead of that simple awareness—I finally came to that—my first response, and this just shows the proliferating nature of conceit: I'm out there walking, it's freezing cold, "I'm so cold," and immediately my mind went to fantasies of being on retreat in Hawaii, walking on the beach under the palm trees with warm breezes. I spent not that long—long enough, maybe a few minutes—just lost in this mind-created world. Hawaii is a long way from Barry, Massachusetts, but it was right there in my mind. You see how this conceit "I am" just led to this whole proliferation of a mind-created world.

This happens a lot. And even when it's not in and of itself painful or some kind of suffering, it's deluded, because it is a mind-created world that we're living in. It's not actually happening, except as thoughts and images in the mind. So we want to see it.

But perhaps a more impactful level of understanding this conceit "I am"—and again, I saw this on retreat. I really love coming and doing this course right after retreat, because when I'm on retreat I get so fascinated by the looking and understanding. Every once in a while we get an insight into a particular kind of suffering and then see, okay, where's the release in this?

This is an example of that happening when I was on retreat. I don't remember all the details exactly, but it was something about being on retreat—I'd been there maybe for a month or so—and then I just spent some amount of time, maybe half an hour, an hour, just frittering away some time. That's all it was. I can't even remember what I was doing. But then when I started reflecting about being on retreat and the basic intention for being there, I saw that I really started getting down on myself. "Joseph, why are you wasting all this time?" There was just a lot of self-judgment and self-criticism in this negative way. I felt quite contracted, in a down mood. It didn't feel good.

But then wisdom came to the rescue, for which I was very grateful. I realized that all these thoughts—the self-critical thoughts, the self-judgmental thoughts—were all rooted in conceit. I was just "I am"-ing in this negative way, strengthening this whole sense of "I am-ness" through these thoughts. It was amazing. As soon as I could see and name the defilement—conceit, *māna*—as soon as I saw what was happening, it took me out of this whole story of myself that I had created, with the attendant down mood and not feeling great about myself. As soon as I thought, "Oh, this is just *māna*, this is just conceit, 'I am'-ing in a negative way rather than in an inflated way," the whole thing disappeared. I was just back right in the

moment with whatever was happening.

There's an important point here which we can generalize from. When we're in some state of suffering or discontent and we can name the particular defilement in the mind that's causing the suffering or causing the discontent—in this case it was conceit, sometimes it might be craving or wanting—we name it. We say, "Oh, that's just craving."

When we name and see the defilement, immediately it can extricate us from this enmeshment in the story of ourselves that we've created. This is a very liberating aspect of mindfulness, but it means coming out of the enchantment of the story and really seeing underneath—what is the defilement that's creating this story? We're getting to the root of it, to the cause of it. And as soon as we become mindful of that, it's much easier to see the impersonality of it. The *mana*, the conceit—even though it's all about "I am"—the *mana* itself is selfless. We see the impersonality of the defilements, and this helps us see them and be with them with mindfulness and equanimity. In that mindfulness, they disappear.

In the Buddhist discourses, very often when practitioners are seeing some defilement in the mind, the expression will be, "Mara, I see you"—Mara being the embodiment of ignorance and delusion. As soon as the practitioner says, "Mara, I see you," Mara just disappears. That's actually what happens. It's in the seeing of the defilements that we can let go of them. This is a very practical application of all these teachings, of being mindful of these *papañcas,* of craving, of conceit.

It is interesting to notice just how seductive the stories we have about ourselves are. Sometimes the stories are farces, sometimes they're tragedies—all kinds of stories. But in all of them, we are the star. We are the center, even when in deepest suffering or greatest delight. At the center of it all is the "I," the "I am." It's very helpful to get underneath the story, back to the basic building blocks of our experience.

There's one famous sutta called the Bahiya Discourse, which encapsulates this teaching about coming back to the basic elements of experience—the building blocks of our life. There's a whole backstory to it, but the essence is this: A man named Bahiya came to the Buddha while the Buddha was on alms round and said, "Please teach me." He had great urgency. At first the Buddha said, "Wait till I finish alms round, I'll go back to the monastery and give the teaching." But Bahiya was very insistent. Given that the Buddha was standing in the middle of the road with his alms bowl, he gave a very pithy teaching:

"In the seen, there is just what is seen. In the heard, there is just what is heard. In the sensed—that is smell, taste, and touch—there is only what is sensed. In the thought, there is only what is thought."

So simple, but profound, because it gets us right back to the direct experience of the impersonal building blocks of our whole lives. The mind is freed from the proliferation of story. We just come back: in the seen, just the seen; in the heard, just the heard; in the sensed, just the sensed; in the thought, just the thought.

As my teacher Munindraji said, "It's simple but not easy." I came across a quote from the Indian poet and

philosopher Tagore: "It's very simple to be happy. But it's very difficult to be simple." In some way, we can think of our whole practice as learning simplicity, extricating ourselves from this seduction of mental proliferation based on craving, conceit, and wrong view.

There's one other aspect of conceit I want to mention, because it has a tremendous effect on our lives and our relationships. It's so common and quite pervasive: the conceit of comparing ourselves with others, how we evaluate ourselves in relation to some other person or to an idealized presentation of some other being. A good part of our consumer society is all about this. We have advertising showing these perfect beings enjoying perfect happiness with some product, with the implication that if we get that product, we will share in their happiness. On one hand, we can say it's ridiculous. However, this goes deep in us, and we can see it perhaps in more immediate and more frequent ways.

This would be a really helpful experiment to make. Just watch in your interactions with other people—either people you know well or people you don't know well. Sometimes these projections happen even more with those we don't know. Simply see if within oneself there's almost an automatic evaluation of oneself relative to them. Better than, equal to, less than. It could be about anything. It could be about how we look, or about intelligence, or creativity—even about how mindful we are.

On one retreat, I remember I was in the dining room at IMS. It's so ridiculous what the mind can do. I was there being very mindful, of course, with all these judgments about this one person who I was looking at who didn't seem mindful at all. I was in kind of a superior position—"they're not being mindful"—completely missing that in that comparing, I wasn't being mindful at all either. But that was the working of conceit, just that almost automatic comparing that we do and evaluating ourselves in relationship to others.

This is really a source of suffering in our lives. And in some significant way, it closes our hearts to others. We're not just open and being with them and ourselves just as we are, without this evaluation. But when conceit, the proliferation of conceit, operates—and it does often, and we want to see how often it comes—then we can begin to see the impact of it in these very real life situations of our relationships.

So the last of the proliferating tendencies: we have craving, we have conceit, and the last of them is wrong view. Wrong view in the Buddhist sense is the very deeply conditioned belief that there is a self. This is how we commonly understand things, so this is not an aberrant happening. This is the common understanding—of course there's a self, of course there's a me. This is where the teachings can be very challenging to our conventional way of understanding things.

When we hold this belief, which most people do, it's kind of the bedrock of how we understand what's going on—this belief in the self. As I said earlier, this belief that there's some core unchanging being located somewhere or other that is who and what I am. We don't quite know what it is, which is interesting. But even not quite knowing what it is, we believe it to be the center of our existence.

The Buddha is really urging us and challenging us to investigate this. Because if we don't, we are just going to continue proliferating in all of these ways—through craving, conceit, and wrong view, this notion of self. The Buddha had very direct words about wrong view. He said there's nothing as harmful to us as wrong view. Because based on wrong view, based on this view of self, it's leading us in the wrong direction. It's like everything we do—instead of heading towards liberation, towards greater freedom, towards greater ease—if it's rooted in this belief in self, it's just leading to more difficulty and to more suffering in our lives. That's why the Buddha said there's nothing more dangerous than wrong view.

The teachings are all about understanding this. We could say coming to right view—really coming to understand through mindfulness and through our practice the workings of all these proliferating tendencies rooted in self and strengthening self. If we can see them operating more clearly—and they are operating in our lives extensively—that's the path to greater freedom. That's the path to greater ease.

So hopefully you've gotten some idea of these three proliferating tendencies. I'd like to give you a parting exercise, which I hope you'll do before our next meeting. This particular exercise will give you a very immediate, direct experience of how pervasive these *papañca* are, these proliferating tendencies are. They're not just occasional things. They are the matrix, really, of how we're living. So we want to understand. We want to see them.

This is the exercise: Take some time—it might be just five minutes, ten minutes. You might do it going for a walk, but it could be doing anything. I found it particularly helpful going for a walk because the physical activity was very simple. Going for a walk, trying to be mindful—I'm not talking about necessarily this super slow, creeping mindfulness walk, but just taking a normal walk while trying to be mindful of the body moving. Then for these five or ten minutes, as you're walking and being more or less mindful, have the intention to notice the quickly passing thoughts that go through the mind. I think you'll see that there's a pretty steady stream of them. The problem is that most of them are quite light.

They're not necessarily disturbing. They're not necessarily any big drama. But they could be some memory of the past or some planning for the future—something or other reinforcing these three papañca, right? But not necessarily in a way that wakes us up to them.

What I found is I was just amazed at how frequently these thoughts come, and they don't necessarily even last long—maybe thirty seconds or a minute or fifteen seconds. They can be quick, they can be light, and therefore unnoticed. But all the while, they are strengthening the sense of self through these three proliferating tendencies. We might just have some desire for something, or even some sense of "I'm walking"—in one way or another, these quickly passing thoughts are just strengthening these three tendencies.

So first, it's important to see this so we can appreciate the importance of investigating all of it. It's not something to ignore. We can see not only how pervasive it is, but also how, in one way or another, these thoughts are strengthening this wrong view of self.

To the degree that as these thoughts come we're actually aware of them as thinking—rather than lost in them, lost in the dream of them for that particular few minutes—in the seeing of them, we're actually weakening the sense of self. We're seeing, "Oh, this is just a passing thought." And we're not lost in the story of it, in the creation of self in it. We begin to reframe all experiences as not mine, not I, not myself. That's going to be the theme of the next talk.

The big question remains: given all this conditioning power of these proliferating tendencies, how do we free ourselves? How do we work with it in a way that leads to liberation? This will be the subject of the next talk.

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