Recognizing Delusion

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Tonight the topic is delusion, and this has come up a few times in the groups with questions about how to see it and how we can recognize it. We've talked about it some in the groups, but I thought I would explore it thoroughly this evening.

Delusion, as you all know, is one of the three root kilesas of which the Buddha said, if we can become free of greed, aversion, and delusion, that is freedom. Freedom from greed, freedom from aversion, freedom from delusion—this indeed is Nibbana.

While greed and aversion we get relatively familiar with in both their subtle and obvious forms, we start to recognize them especially as we check into the attitude in our mind. We may see subtle forms of greed, like just leaning into experience, or the obvious forms, like really wanting that second piece of chocolate. Likewise with aversion. We get pretty familiar with greed and aversion, and both Carol and I have spoken about that quite a bit.

Delusion is harder to see by its very nature, of course. Harder to see, but not impossible. Tonight I'd like to offer some information to hopefully lay the terrain around delusion so that you might begin to recognize it in your experience.

One of the main ways that delusion functions is as a filter on our experience—we're seeing through something that's not allowing us to see things as they are. Yatabhuta, as Carol was speaking about last week: things as they have come to be. When the mind is clear from greed, aversion, and delusion, we can see things clearly. But filters—I like to use that word—it's kind of like we have a lens on that colors our perception, how we take in experience. That is a form of delusion, when we don't recognize that there's a filter there of some sort.

Greed and aversion themselves can become filters on our experience. In one way, we can see that delusion can arise when greed and aversion are there. Some of you have reported this, described this in your experience—seeing how there's an aversive state, for instance, and then just recognizing, "Oh my gosh, there's this filter, this aversive filter. No matter where I turn and look, I look at the flowers and it's like, enough already." Just seeing that the filter is distorting how we take in experience. That distortion is a form of delusion.

Delusion can arise out of greed and aversion, but fundamentally delusion is more foundational. Greed and aversion themselves are really based on a misperception, a delusion, a misunderstanding, a kind of view or belief that underlies our mind.

For instance, wanting or desire—greed itself is that pull towards something, that sticky quality, that "ooh, yeah," that heading in that direction. Aversion itself is the quality of mind that wants to separate. But the delusion that underlies greed is the belief that getting that thing will make me happy. Greed wouldn't arise if that belief weren't there. Likewise with aversion: there's a belief in there that if I could somehow separate from that unpleasant thing, then I'd be happy. That's the delusion embedded in aversion.

Greed and aversion are founded on delusion, and we can begin to see in them the beliefs that are operating. We've been talking about looking at beliefs in the groups and some in the hall as well, almost as a way to check in—a different form of checking the attitude. Sometimes we can ask, "What's being believed right now?" That can begin to reveal some of these underlying delusions.

Now, beliefs are not always delusion. But when they are not seen as belief, there is some way that they're functioning as a filter. When we don't see a belief as a belief, we are taking it as truth, and there's a form of delusion in not recognizing it is a belief. This is a big way that delusion functions—through this aspect in our minds of views, beliefs, ideas, and opinions. That's some of what we'll explore this evening.

I'd like to explore different aspects of delusion. Many of them are based in these different kinds of views and beliefs, but the most obvious kind of delusion, the one that's maybe the easiest to see or the one we're most familiar with, is just basically a disconnection from experience. That's one aspect we'll talk about: this not being connected to experience.

The second form of delusion we'll look at is what I like to call personal or cultural delusion. It's based on our own conditioning—the conditioning of our families, the conditioning of our lives, the conditioning of our culture, the views, ideas, and beliefs that is what we're swimming in, in terms of what we take to be reality, what we take to be true. That level of beliefs and views is a big part of how we relate to the world. This is a kind of level of experience that we begin to see, and many of you have talked about seeing this: seeing patterns and habits of the mind wanting to do certain things, orienting towards familiarity, for instance, or orienting towards new experience. These are conditioned. These are patterns and habits conditioned in our own personal lives based on our families, our cultures, our conditioning.

Then a deeper level of delusion seems to be what I like to call human delusion.

These seem to come with being born as a human being. The Buddha describes some very fundamental forms of delusion that distort how we take in experience, that don't let us really see things as they have come to be, things as they are.

We'll try to cover all of these at some level. While I said I'm going to explore this topic in some depth, I spent one entire series at my center in Redwood City—eight weeks—covering delusion. So to some extent, this feels like just the tip of the iceberg. And yet, I think there will be enough here for you to begin to recognize it.

It's not so much—and again, I want to restate this—pointing to this topic and talking about delusion is not

the instruction to go see if you can see delusion. This is a description of how delusion may be seen. The description may create the conditions for there to be a seeing of it. So you don't have to go do this. It's much more just information that may help you begin to recognize delusion when it's happening. Because it's happening all the time. Delusion happens a lot.

This first kind—this not connecting with experience, this being disconnected—basically, lack of awareness is a form of delusion. When we're not mindful, this can be a form of delusion. When we're not aware of what's going on, when we're lost in thought, when the mind has created its story and has taken up residence in its thought world. It's so amazing to see this happen.

Often we see it not so much when we are in it, because when we're in it, we're just in that world, believing it. But when we're curious about the moment of mindfulness returning, sometimes, as I've been pointing to, we get this contrast between what it's like to not be aware and what it's like to be aware. In the moment of mindfulness returning, we can get this sense of what the mind was doing—of being completely absorbed in the reality of a thought. It almost feels like a cartoon bubble that bursts.

When we are in that world, it's like we've fully taken up residence there, and we fully believe it in a way—fully believe its existence in that moment. We can see this as we come out of the world of thought. Sometimes we can get that flavor of how much we had invested, how much the mind had invested in those thoughts and in that experience. And then coming back, it's like, "Wow, that doesn't exist."

Sometimes, when mindfulness returns with a lot of clarity, there can be this sense of "Wow, that was so much delusion in that previous moment."

At one point I noticed my mind had woken up into a thought about being with an old partner—someone I hadn't been with in years, and had kind of worked through the reactivity around. In coming out of that thought world, there was this confusion. "What? I'm not in relationship with that person. What's going on?" The mind had so completely invested in it that for those moments, it believed that relationship was current. Coming out of it really startled the mind, to see how much it had believed that.

We can see this—see how much our minds believe things—through being lost in our thoughts. And so we can start to be curious about this kind of disconnection in the moment of returning, in the moment when mindfulness returns. We can become familiar with mindfulness, but also develop some familiarity with that quality of mind that is disconnected.

There are other flavors of this kind of disconnection: spacing out, dullness, sleepiness, even restlessness sometimes, where the mind can be disconnected from experience. We talked about this a little bit last week—that sometimes we can have a belief or view that we can't be mindful while spacing out is happening. A sense that certain states of mind are inherently non-mindful, spacing out being one of them perhaps. And yet, mindfulness can infuse spacing out as well.

I think I said last week, if there's the thought "I can't be mindful while X is happening"—"I can't be mindful

while spacing out is happening"—when I have that kind of thought, I just don't believe it anymore. Let's see: how might it be possible to be mindful while that is happening? There's a curiosity about these states in which we are habitually not mindful.

This area of delusion where we're disconnected from experience is probably the most obvious way that we see delusion, or kind of recognize it after the fact. We don't so much often see it while it's happening, but we notice as we come out of it. We see how thoroughly the mind had been caught, and we may get a little flavor, in the waking up, of that quality of mind being stuck in that world, believing those thoughts.

So we may be able to see the mind heading in that direction. We talked about this last week with noticing where mindfulness gets lost. As we wake up into experience, it begins to familiarize the mind with those kinds of states. We can wake up into spacing out, and if instead of thinking, "Oh, spacing out, let me change the experience," we recognize, "Oh, spacing out—this is being aware of spacing out." This begins to help the mind connect with those states in which we're habitually not mindful. Curiosity is a real ally for us.

The second level of delusion—this personal delusion, cultural delusion, delusion based on societal conditioning, our own conditioning—this is really where these filters begin to come into play: the views, the ideas. As we're conditioned, as we go about our lives and live our lives, we are being conditioned in so many different ways.

A lot of our beliefs and views, part of the reason they're so deeply embedded and not even necessarily seen as beliefs, is because they don't tend to come in through language. We're not really taught these views—many of them. Some were taught explicitly, but many are just absorbed based on how we see interactions happening around us. They're kind of non-verbal beliefs in a way. What's right, what's wrong. Simple things, like culturally how close you stand to somebody you don't know, or how much eye contact you make. These are things we just absorb. There's a lot of this conditioning that happens that we just take to be, "Well, this is the way things are in human interactions."

It's not until we find ourselves in another culture that we're startled. I think this is one of the reasons I liked to travel so much—to be startled by these deeply embedded views and beliefs. "Oh, that's not the way it always works. That's the way it works in my life." When we can see discomfort in a situation, that may be a sign of some view being challenged.

When we're immersed in a view in that way, we don't see it as a view. We just take it to be truth—the way things are. Views are pretty active in our minds. They shape our minds. They shape how we take in experience. While we think we are these kind of neutral recorders of experience—almost like our eyes are cameras and our ears are microphones just picking up experience—there's much more active shaping of our experience that comes partly through our views, our beliefs, our agendas, how our culture has shaped us, how our families have shaped us. What we actually notice, some of that is shaped by our views.

There's been a lot of study about this in recent years. There's a term—confirmation bias—that when we have a view, our system tends to orient towards taking in information that confirms that view, and likewise not taking in information that disconfirms it. This is a form of delusion. It's not necessarily making us unaware of everything, but there are certain things we are not aware of. There is some lack of awareness because the view is like a filter with holes in it—it lets certain things in and not others.

Views really shape our lives. What are our views, our beliefs about who we are, what we're capable of? Our views and beliefs about others, who they are? These views and beliefs can prevent us from seeing other people as they really are. We box people in. We limit them based on our views about them. And we limit ourselves based on our views about ourselves, what we think we're capable of.

Then there are some pernicious cultural views that shape us too. Some of these cultural views are responsible for some of the biggest kinds of suffering in our world: racism, sexism, homophobia—the views and beliefs around skin color and gender and sexual orientation and gender identity. These views and beliefs shape how we relate to each other.

Certain cultural views just come in through osmosis in a way. One that seems so pervasive in the United States is the idea that this is the land of opportunity—anybody who works hard enough can achieve their dreams. This kind of comes in somehow. Believing this as truth, we may not be aware that there are limitations on opportunities.

Often, the color of our skin, our orientation, our gender identity can influence those opportunities. And so this kind of view can prevent—in particular, white people, white heterosexual people—from seeing the privilege that this carries, that the opportunities are available for certain people and not necessarily available equally. This can lead to the not seeing, the delusion around privilege. White privilege is basically a form of delusion, this not seeing.

These filters, what we take in and what we don't take in—it doesn't even have to be a view that we're holding deeply that has this filtering quality where we see certain things and not see other things. It can be as simple as an agenda, something that we pick up for a very short time: "I'm going to do this." That agenda orients us towards the task at hand. This is useful. It helps us filter out things that aren't relevant to the task at hand, kind of focuses us in. It's called selective attention—there's a psychological name for it. When we have an agenda to do something, our attention selects things that are relevant to that agenda, and we miss, we do not see things that are not relevant to that agenda.

Now again, this is a useful functioning of our minds. It actually can help us accomplish things. And yet there's the misunderstanding here—the belief that we're getting the full set of information. Even when we are engaged in a selective task, something we're told later might surprise us: "Did you see that happen?"

There was a study—many of you have probably heard about this—where people were given a task to watch on a video the number of times a basketball passed between players in white t-shirts. There were

different colored t-shirts, and they had to count, so they had to do quite a bit of monitoring and tracking when the basketball was being passed from one person to another. That was the task. That was the agenda. So they watched. And most people could correctly say the right number of passes between the people in the white t-shirts. And a few people said, "Was there like a gorilla that walked through that video?" And some people were like, "No, there was no gorilla." But they actually played it back, and there was a gorilla—a person in a gorilla suit who had walked through the basketball court while this was going on. And a large number of people did not see the gorilla, just didn't see it at all.

That's selective attention at work. It's kind of stunning to see that video played back and say, "Wow, that's amazing how I could not have even seen that." It creates this awe at how the mind can actually not see something. It begins to help us recognize: my mind is not seeing what is there. It's seeing what it is expecting.

So the views, the shaping of our minds—this can be a learning from that. And yet I read in one review of this study that there were some number of people who, after the video was played back, said, "That cannot be the same video, because I would have seen the gorilla." Now that is really delusion—the inability to know that this is how our minds work. We need some respect for our minds. It's useful that it does this, but we also have to have some respect. This is one of the things that gives me great pause around single-witness identification. It's so easy for an agenda of even a moment to obscure information.

Knowing this is helpful. There are some other ways that views are formed personally, but I think I'm going to move on to the more human side of this, the deeper kinds of delusion. But again, just to orient, or to be curious about what are the views that are happening—when we can recognize the views, the beliefs that are happening, we don't have to tell ourselves not to believe that. We don't have to say, "It's a view, it's a belief, so I shouldn't believe it." But it's useful to know it is a view. It's useful to know that it's happening and maybe filtering our experience. Even recognizing, "Oh, this is what's being believed," is really helpful. We don't have to try to convert that belief into non-belief. It may be a useful belief, but still it's useful to notice it as belief.

So that can be a simple kind of version of checking the attitude, almost: What's being believed right now?

So the deeper kind of delusion—a more fundamental human form of delusion—is something we seem to share simply because we have our human minds and bodies and brains and the way things work in there. This is a more insidious form of delusion because not only do our family and friends share these delusions, but pretty much everybody on the planet shares them until we start having some teachings and some understanding around how our minds work.

One of the key aspects of the way human delusion works is that we tend to relate to experience through concept and believe that concept to be the reality. We have a perception of some kind and then we take that perception to be what's actually out there. There's a range of levels to this. It starts with simple perception—just seeing something and identifying it. That sound is the sound of a mourning dove. That

sight, that lump on the road, is maybe a dead chipmunk. There's a perception there.

Then there's a deepening of the way delusion begins to work: we begin to think about that perception. The teaching I'm referring to here is the Vipallasa Sutta, which is basically about distortions. Vipallasa means distortion or inversion. It talks about three levels of this. There are distortions of perception, where we're taking our perceptions to be reality. There are distortions of thought, where we start thinking about the thing—like when I talked about taking birth into that world of thought. That's the distortion of thought. We take our thoughts to be reality. And then there are the views, the beliefs. That's the third level, the deepest level.

Some of you have heard this story a number of times. When I was in Burma practicing at Shwe Oo Min, my dorm was relatively close to the wall of the monastery, and the sounds of the village came over the wall—the loudspeakers, human noises, all kinds of things. Each evening I would hear this repeated sound, a kind of squealing. I identified it or perceived it as a pig squealing. That was what I had heard squealing before, so that was the perception: the sound perceived as a pig.

I heard this regularly each night, and at some point the mind created this idea. Here's where it shifts into thought. I created this idea that this squealing sound sounded kind of distressed, and I got the notion that there was a butcher on the other side of that wall, that each evening at that time the butcher was slaughtering a pig for the next day to sell at the market. There was a lot of emotional response to this—compassion for the pig, for the pain of that. So there was the sound, the perception, and then the belief, the thought that this pig was being slaughtered. Now, I knew this was an idea. I knew I didn't really know what was happening on the other side of the wall. But still, there was the belief and the emotional response to it. Perception creating that response.

Then one evening I was out walking at that time of day instead of sitting in my room. It was dusk, and I was walking up and down the quarter-mile road in the middle of the monastery. There were these swooping creatures flying by really close. I thought, "Oh, those are bats." And they were squealing. That was the sound I had been hearing.

While I had some idea that the notion of a pig being slaughtered was a view, it had not entered my mind that the belief that it was a pig at all was also a view. There's no need for compassion when it's not only not being slaughtered—it's not even a pig.

So again, this pattern: the mind tends to relate to experience not through actual experience but through our concepts, through our ideas, through our beliefs, at a very basic level. Looking at the flowers, looking at the trees, looking at people, hearing sounds—what we perceive, we take to be reality. We relate to experience through our perceptions, create thoughts and views about that. And largely this goes unnoticed until perception makes a mistake, until our—

It gets pointed out to us that our perceptions and our thoughts are wrong.

The thing that the Buddha points to—or actually I think it's more in the commentaries that it's pointed to—this kind of deepening entrenchment of delusion, is that it's relatively easy for the correct perception to unmask the incorrect perception. So as soon as I saw the bats and heard the squealing, it was clear: "Oh, that wasn't a pig." It wasn't like I held on to the idea. "No, no, it was really a pig. There really is a pig on the other side of that wall." It was so clear. That perception was seen through pretty quickly because it was just a misperception.

When it gets into the thought realm, it gets a little harder sometimes to break that delusion or belief. And when we get to views, it gets even harder. We can see this in how confirmation bias works.

I read a study about people who have differing views on a topic. I don't know whether it was political, but they were doing some work on trying to understand how views, whether views can come closer together, whether people can see things as views, how they get hardened into views. They did this study about two people with very different views on a topic, and each one was encouraged to try to convince the other person of their own view, to try to point out why their view was appropriate or correct. What seemed to happen in that situation is that the views got more entrenched. We tend to, because of confirmation bias, orient to things that confirm those views. We don't orient to things that disconfirm them—we actively discount them. When we get to the level of belief, it gets harder to take in information that disconfirms the view. We just don't go there. Even if we hear it, we somehow figure that's wrong, it's bad information.

This is going on so much in our country, in the United States right now, this kind of entrenchment in views. The commentaries pointed to this: when it gets to the level of belief, it's very much clung to. People will cling to beliefs even in the face of evidence to the contrary. This is one of the ways that delusion works in our mind—this entrenchment from perception to thought to belief.

Another very foundational teaching in this same text, the text on the distortions, is that the Buddha points to how we tend to take what's impermanent to be permanent, we tend to take what is unreliable as reliable, and we tend to take what is not self as self. You probably recognize these three: anicca, dukkha, anatta. Anicca—impermanent. Dukkha—unreliable, suffering. Anatta—not self. The distortion, the inversion, is that we tend to orient in the world as if things were permanent, as if things were reliable, as if things were self—turning on its head things as they actually are. This is the most fundamental form of delusion in a way, this kind of distortion.

Sayadaw U Tejaniya says of this kind of delusion: "Delusion doesn't mask the object, it masks the nature of the object." It masks the true nature of the object. So we see something, but we take it to be permanent. It's not that we're not knowing, not that we're not aware of something—but we are seeing it in a distorted way. We are seeing it as reliable, permanent, or self.

We can begin to be curious about these tendencies, the tendency to land on something as solid, to take something as being lasting. If anything feels solid or stable in your experience, be curious about it. Notice that feeling of solid and stable and investigate it. What does the mind take to be permanent?

It's interesting—in my sense, we create this kind of permanent impermanent. We know that things are not really forever at some level of our mind. We know that things are not forever. We know at some level that we will die. I actually saw this today as I was walking up the hill. I was thinking about being in here and reflecting on what I was going to say, thinking about sitting up here in front of the room, and I thought: in this moment, I'm believing that's going to happen. I'm taking myself as permanent. In this moment, I'm going to get there. And yet—it was really windy and I had seen some pretty big branches down on the road—who knows? I might get clobbered by some tree falling down and not make it.

Even for little moments, we take up residence in the belief or the view of permanence.

And it's belief in permanence in ourselves. There's a sense, a way almost, that we believe in our immortality.

The Buddha encouraged us to actually reflect on this regularly. There's a teaching on the five subjects for frequent recollection, and four of those subjects have to do with reflecting on impermanence: I am of the nature to age—I have not gone beyond aging. I am of the nature to sicken—I have not gone beyond sickness. I am of the nature to die—I have not gone beyond dying. All that I have, beloved and pleasing, will become otherwise, will become separated from me.

When we see, even in just little flashes or moments, how we project ourselves into the future—that kind of "oh, I will be there"—that's a moment of taking up residence in permanence and believing it. So we can just be curious about that. We can also be curious about what it is we're taking to be solid or stable. Is it really solid or stable? How long does it last?

And seeing what's unreliable as reliable—this is the perspective on which greed and aversion are based. We think there's something out there that's reliable as a source for happiness, something that brings pleasure. "That's going to make me happy." There's this form of taking what is unreliable as a source for lasting happiness, as being as good as it gets, being the place where we can land. This aspect of taking what is unreliable to be reliable is the ground out of which greed and aversion grow.

So again, beginning to be curious: Where are we looking for happiness? That searching. Several of you have talked about this, the searching, and some of you have pointed to a kind of pure sense of wanting—not even knowing what you want, but just wanting something. At certain points in our practice, the mind may just be like, "Yeah, there's got to be somewhere, somewhere I can land and find happiness." This is a very deeply conditioned belief. It's not hardwired—it is possible to see through it—but it's really deeply conditioned.

There have been times in my practice when I was seeing the mind just craving some place to land where it could rest, and I was aware of that. Just like I mentioned in one of the groups today: "Yep, I see you. You're not going to find anything, but search away. Have at it." Because this deep way in which delusion manifests—we're not going to be able to just say, "Oh, I'll stop doing that." If we could do that, that would

be fantastic. But it's so deeply conditioned that often what we can simply do is know that it's happening.

Just watching the mind searching, searching, searching for some place to land and find happiness. Okay, that's what's happening. I let the mind do that. It was like, "Have at it. You won't find anything, but I can't stop you, so I'll just hang out with you while you do this." It was kind of sweet in a way—this part of my mind that just thought, "No, I've got to exhaust every single possibility." Okay, we'll let you try.

These delusions are embedded really deep. Sometimes all we can do is watch them unfold, watch our mind believing them, and know: this is the mind believing something. This is delusion.

The time is short, so I'm not going to go into not-self—maybe one of us will talk about that another time. But one piece I want to point to is that one of the ways we begin to really see delusion—and part of the reason I could see that searching as just a delusional mind—was because there had been, at some point, the mind recognizing at a very deep level the letting go of that searching, and a different kind of happiness becoming available. The seeing through of delusion can happen.

We can see through delusions at many different levels. There are various ways of pointing to delusion, and there are different levels and depths of it. We may see through it at some point, and when we do, it's quite stunning. Some of you have mentioned this sense of "Wow, this is so obvious. How could I not see this?" It becomes so clear that it doesn't make any sense to want something. We see through the delusion there.

But then, minutes later, maybe an hour later, sometime later, that state of understanding shifts. The seeing from that perspective, the wisdom of that seeing, has a life of its own, and our delusion comes back. Yet in that coming back, when we've seen through it and it returns, rather than having the sense of "What am I doing wrong that now I can't see that anymore?"—perhaps we can have the sense of "Oh, now I can see this as delusion."

Because once we've seen it, once we've had that kind of breaking through to recognize what it's like without that delusion, then when that delusion is functioning, we can know: this is delusion at work. This mind is not trustable. This mind is filtered by these views, these ideas, this perspective. It's not seeing things clearly. We can know that.

So delusion can be seen in this way. We can't choose non-delusion, but we can practice in this simple way: what's here in this moment, noticing our relationship to experience. This creates the conditions for the understanding, the seeing, for the wisdom to grow. It creates the conditions for wisdom to grow, and it's wisdom that sees through delusion. We don't do that. We don't make it happen.

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