Four Fields of Craving

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:01:23

About a specific quality of mind, a specific mental factor that arises—and that's the quality of grasping.

It also happens to be, along with its sister quality of craving which is slightly weaker, the second noble truth, or the origin of suffering. So it's not a slight quality, and it's one which I imagine we're all somewhat familiar with as we sit here through the days.

Grasping is a stronger form of craving.

When the Buddha was first enlightened, as you know, his mind was not especially inclined to go out and teach. With his capacity to survey the world and see what was going on anywhere he looked, he thought, "This truth that I have discovered is very profound and hard to see. You can't discover it by just thinking about it. The wise person has to experience it for themself."

But what he saw when he looked around, and what he thought to himself—at least as tradition hands it down to us—is that the people in this generation (and I don't think it's changed much) rely so much on attachment, in fact delight in attachment, that it would be too hard for them to see the truth. Because basically, attachment is blinding. And so his mind favored inaction, as they put it.

Now, one of the characteristics of a Buddha is that he has discovered the truth for himself and didn't have a teacher who said, "This is what you do and this is the understanding you will come to." He discovered it by himself. And that was the case because at that time the teaching was not alive in the world. So had he decided not to teach, it could have been a serious decision for all of us, because Buddhas don't come along all that often.

As you've heard the story, a being from a Brahma world came down and begged him to look around and see that while there were beings with much dust on their eyes, there were also a lot of creatures with just a little dust on their eyes. Those people would be able to hear the teaching and learn. And the Buddha saw that, and in seeing that, decided to teach.

I relate the dust on our eyes to this grasping, the tendency of the mind to grasp and thus blind us.

When the Buddha did start teaching, the first sermon that he gave was on these four noble truths. The first one being the truth of unsatisfactoriness or dukkha, which we've talked a lot about—all the various levels of it: grief, birth, death, sickness, old age, lamentation, despair, on and on, the whole list.

The second truth is that of the origin of this dissatisfaction. One can look at it on a moment-to-moment

level. And that's this quality of craving in the mind, which produces renewal of being. It's suffering because we're craving what is elusive, what's insubstantial, what can never bring satisfaction. Also, when craving is present in the mind, it blinds one to a clear perception of truth, to a clear perception of reality in that moment. This is suffering. And it leads to a perpetuation of more of the same.

The other two truths—I don't really want to talk about them, but I hate to just mention the first two without adding the second two because it sounds too pessimistic. The third one, of course, is that there is a cessation, an ending to the suffering. And the fourth truth is the path to that ending, this eightfold path that all of us here are on at this moment.

To focus on the second truth: the difference between craving and clinging or grasping can be thought of this way. Craving is similar to someone who's groping in the dark to steal an object—the mind is inclining towards that object. But grasping corresponds to actually reaching out and grabbing it. You're really stealing that object at that time. And that goes on to give rise to concepts of "I" and "mine," of self.

Classically there are spoken of the sixfold realms of grasping, the sixfold realms of clinging. As Joseph spoke of the other night, there are only six types of sense objects that ever arise in our field of experience: eye objects, hearing, smelling, tasting, bodily feeling, and mind objects. They're just changing, one after the other, one after the other, coming and going with incredible rapidity.

Whenever there's contact between any sense object, sense base—such as a sight, the eye, and the knowing of that—when there is that contact of those three coming together, at any contact, that is when grasping can arise. And that is why mindfulness is so important.

When we're mindful of the process, we can see it unfold: there's contact, a smell arises, consciousness of a smell. The feeling arises that it's pleasant. And there's craving—the mind just kind of inclines towards that smell. Recognizes it as bread baking.

With mindfulness, that can be seen, and it doesn't have to turn into any big story. It's a pleasant smell. The mind inclines towards it. And that's all. Wisdom arises, can arise, from that seeing, from seeing the process. And in that moment of mindfulness...

The grasping does not arrive, does not arise, and this is the purification. In that moment of seeing the process, the clinging fades, the craving fades, and the mind is in that moment purified. Suffering then does not proceed to follow from that pleasant sensation.

But when it's not seen, when we don't see that moment so clearly, the craving would tend to strengthen into grasping. "Oh, that bread smells so good. I would really like to have a piece. I'm really hungry. I don't know how I'm going to make it through this sitting." And it can go on and on. The mind becomes really fixated on that particular experience. As one moment conditions the next, the grasping can grow stronger and stronger. We become less and less present. And that, to me, is what the Buddha meant by having dust on our eyes. We don't know what's happening when we're blinded by grasping like that.

The Buddha said, "For some people, contact—the point where sense and object meet—is enthralling. And so they are washed by the tides of being, drifting along an empty, pointless road. Nowhere is there any sign of broken chains. But other people can come to understand their sense activity, and because they understand it, stillness fills them with delight. They see just what contact does. And so their craving ends, and they realize total calm."

That sounds quite lovely. But a lot of the time it's not so neat and tidy. We don't simply notice, "Oh, I see the contact, I notice craving, no problem, it's gone." A lot of the time we wake up way far down the road, lost in some dream of eating a gourmet meal in a Parisian restaurant, and we have to really think back to figure out how we got there. "Oh yes, there was that smell of bread baking ten minutes ago, and I didn't notice it." Grasping can be very compelling.

What can happen from waking up from a fantasy like that is you go to lunch and bread isn't served. You're having millet and some kind of vegetable stew, and there's incredible aversion in the mind—whereas perhaps yesterday you were craving millet. It does a flip. Not only was one lost and blinded by the grasping, missing what was present during the sitting, but one is unable to appreciate what is actually present at lunch because the grasping to that idea, that smell, is still going on. When grasping is in the mind, we can't appreciate what is present.

It's like the story of the pickpocket in the time of the Buddha. The Buddha was giving a discourse and all these people were sitting there—this was during the time when many of the suttas end with all five hundred people becoming enlightened. It was worthwhile listening to one of his discourses. But the pickpocket could see only people's pockets, because that's what the grasping mind was focused on: wanting the money, wanting people's valuables, totally blinded to anything else going on.

Our practice here, knowing how blinding grasping can be, is not to judge it or fear it or condemn it or condemn ourselves for getting caught in it, but simply to see it, to understand it when it arises. Krishnamurti says, "Unless the ways of desire are understood, illusion is inevitable." The Buddha also encourages us to understand how grasping works. He says, "There are many kinds of suffering in the world, and all of them grow from the same source: grasping. When a person knows no better, she or he gives way to this grasping and, slow and dulled, goes through one misery after another. So do not create this for yourselves. Use your knowledge to see how suffering begins and develops in attachment."

How can we begin to use our knowledge to see this, except by investigating grasping itself when it's arising? Not hating it, not trying to shut it out, not trying to pretend it's not happening and that we're really equanimous, but by really looking at it. The experiential nature of desire, of grasping, is the only way we'll truly come to understand it.

One way to begin experiencing it is very simply, on a physical level, just imagining what it's like. You're sitting calmly. Objects are arising. There's a thought. There's a sensation. There's the in and the out, the rising, the falling, an image, a sound.

You're kind of noticing and noting, nothing very much. And suddenly one arises and then—*aha*, this one. What does that feel like in that moment? I personally experience it almost as if the body were lurching forward. A tightening, a sense of being off balance. It's not comfortable. The experience of grasping itself is actually unpleasant. It's unbalanced.

And what's happening in that moment when grasping has arisen? Out of that flow of rapidly changing objects of awareness—perceptions, sounds, images, thoughts—one particular one has been isolated and grasped onto. Through that identification with it comes a whole flow of constructions. A whole self-image gets created, a whole sense of separation between me and other. Our perception becomes distorted in that moment. The mind becomes unbalanced, wavering and unsteady. It can't really see so clearly what's going on, never mind appreciating what's going on.

We can't really experience or know the interrelatedness of things—of the world, of life, of our experience—when there's grasping in the mind. Because when something has been isolated and grasped onto, whether a thought, a memory, a sound, or a self-idea, in that moment there's an immediate separation between me and other, me and the world. There's no real sense of interconnectedness. There's just me, the object grasped after, and everything else is in the way.

Two examples. The first uses a very common retreat experience: the VR, or vipassana romance—that person you're just so fascinated by, even though you may never have spoken. Say you're in your usual walking space, walking very mindfully, quite connected with the sensations of lifting, moving, placing. The mind is fairly calm, and this person just walks across your field of vision and walks away.

There's not really an awareness of seeing, but there's an awareness of pleasant experience. And suddenly: *Wow, that person. Maybe they're going to come walk here right next to me. Wouldn't that be far out? Or maybe I'll be able to sit next to them at lunch. Gee, I wonder if they even notice that I'm here. I wonder if I should leave a note on their zafu.* And on and on.

In that moment, what's happened to the clarity of seeing? Are you aware of anyone else in the room? You might be—you might wish they'd leave so that person would have room to come walk next to you. The same when you go into the dining room. Are you aware of the environment? Are you aware even of your own feet touching the floor? Perception has become very distorted by this grasping after. And it's not even grasping after the reality of a person being there. It was just a pleasant sight that walked by and has been gone for ten minutes, but the grasping mind continues to build on it. When you really tune into that, it's actually quite unpleasant—very out of touch, very separative.

Contrast this with a time when you're walking, perhaps in the same place, but with a very calm mind, very tuned in to just the perception of lifting the foot. Perhaps there's tension and pressure, there's awareness of some thoughts coming and going, and there's that sense of real pristine beauty. You just look up and see the sunlight and there's a sense of how beautiful that is, and then that's let go and on with the walking. There can be this feeling of real calm and perfection just in that moment. Nothing much happening. Very

ordinary.

So what's the difference? The only difference can be that there's no grasping in the mind. When there's no grasping, it's possible for perception to be very clear and undistorted. There's no isolating, no sense of having to separate me from there, from other. It's possible to know very clearly what's present and really appreciate it because the mind is free from grasping in that moment. This is a taste of the peace of mind of non-grasping—that sense of completeness in the moment, of nowhere to go, nothing to want, just a sense of wholeness and completeness.

As we continue to investigate, to develop our mindfulness, to see and understand the nature of this attachment, those moments become less rare as our practice continues.

I want to give one other, slightly less subtle example of how blinding and distorting grasping can be—one that's not from retreat, just so we're all clear that grasping also arises when we're not on retreat, although we might not see it in quite such a subtle way.

This was an experience that happened to me when I was in England a couple of years ago, visiting an American friend of mine. I only had a week, and I had to be back here. I had one of those tickets you can't change or you lose all your money. And I had to be back for work, so I felt the pressure to return.

My friend lived in the south of England, and we drove up to London, staying in a friend's apartment for the night. I was going to take the train to the airport the next morning. The friend wasn't there, and our other friends in London were all away as well.

So the next morning I had called a cab. I was getting ready to go when my friend became struck with the idea that he really had to drive me to the airport. It wasn't just a casual suggestion—I mean, he was on his knees begging. Could he take me to the airport?

I said, "It's really fine. It's easy to get the cab. I'll take the subway. It goes right to the airport. No problem."

We had this discussion about five times in an hour, with increasing franticness on his part, until finally I couldn't stand it anymore. I said, "Okay, okay. I'll cancel the cab. You can take me to the airport."

Now, this was his grasping. He wanted to spend a little more time with me. So already this last hour together had been miserable because we'd been arguing about it the whole time. By this point I had about two hours before the flight.

The thing is, he had no idea how to get to the airport, and neither did I. Our friends were all out of London, and the only map we had was one of these London A to Zs, which are great if you know where you are. But they're just little squares—about a hundred pages with only a few blocks on each page. You can find where you are, and then it says to go to page 47. You flip to 47, find where you are, and you're already off it again. It's not like you can just turn page after page; it's scattered all through the book. Plus you have to know which direction you're going—and we didn't.

So we called around. He thought of someone, finally got directions. The person said, "But it'll probably take you a good hour and a half." By this time I had an hour and forty-five minutes. It'll take an hour and a half to get there.

We got in the car. Now he was fine—he got what he wanted at this point. I went crazy. I was just a bundle of tension and nerves, and all I had in my mind was: *I've got to get that plane. I've got to get that plane.* I could hardly talk to my friend. He was just in the way. Any car on the road was in the way. Anything that happened was in the way of just this grasping in my mind: I've got to get that plane.

We managed to zip down through the instructions, and we got onto the motorway. As soon as we had gone about a mile, we came to a total dead-stop traffic jam. There was absolutely no movement. Since we didn't know where we were, we couldn't really get off at an exit because we would have been completely lost. So we were just stuck there.

My grasping came to a total head at that point—and burst. I thought, "Right. I'm going to miss the plane. Well, that's okay. I've never missed a transatlantic plane before. It'll be interesting."

And the fact that the grasping ended, I really settled back. I started enjoying the ride.

I started looking around and saw how the only difference in that situation was the presence or absence of grasping in my mind. And I started enjoying myself. Unfortunately, my friend at this point went into grasping mode, and he was miserable.

Anyway, the traffic moved. We got to the airport with about ten minutes before the plane was supposed to leave. So that got my grasping going again. And everyone in the airport was seriously in my way at this point. I mean seriously—to the point where I was butting in ahead of people, stepping to the head of huge long lines at Gatwick, asking people if I could get in front of them. But not with a sense of genuine interaction with that person. I mean, I said to them, "Excuse me, could I get in front of you?" But it wasn't a sense of real communication. This was an object out there in my world, in the way.

It was a very illuminating experience. I did make the plane. Of course, in the moment I wasn't thinking, "Isn't this interesting, grasping arising in the mind." But on reflecting back, I saw how divisive it is and how compelling that force of grasping was. And it really showed me that when the mind is filled with grasping, no clear discernment is possible. You can't really judge what is appropriate or suitable action. My friend couldn't really judge that it wasn't so appropriate or suitable to drive me to the airport. It was fine for me to take the tube, and a lot easier. The grasping blinded him to that, and my basic grasping at wanting him to be happy and to please him also blinded me. I went along with the whole thing. You just can't see clearly when it's going on.

As we continue to observe day by day here, we see not only is it incredibly strong, but how often does the tendency of grasping arise in a day, in just one sitting? How often does it come up? I think it's really important for all of us to appreciate just how deep this underlying tendency of grasping is, how quick it is

to arise, and how really awesome the journey of discovery is that we're on. The importance of patience and equanimity in this process can't be overstressed. It's not that we'll just see grasping arise a few times and be free of it. It's a very, very deep underlying tendency, and we need to have respect for the work that we're doing here and a lot of patience.

It may not seem like a lot when you're sitting there and you become aware that the mind is grasping—say, at a thought of what a good sitting you wish you were having. And on noting the grasping, it fades and you go back to rising, falling. That may seem like no big deal. But really, that is an important moment because it's a movement in that moment from blindness and distortion of mind towards clarity, towards freedom. And in that moment of mindfulness, it's strengthening succeeding moments of mindfulness. So don't underrate these little moments of seeing clearly. They're very valuable.

Classically, there's talked about fourfold grasping—four large areas in our lives where grasping takes place. The first one is the area of sense desire, which is rather obvious and rather huge. I like this definition of grasping to sense desire: "laying a firm hold on." It implies the inability to shake off a thing even after experiencing great pain due to it and perceiving its many harmful consequences.

I can really see how often I do that. How often do any of us do that? Continue to hold on to, go after something that we've experienced pain from over and over. Just a simple—maybe not so simple—area of eating. How often do I sit and keep eating something when I know I'm full, when I know in half an hour I'm going to not only feel physically uncomfortable but be mentally berating myself, if not a lot worse? And then the next day do the same thing. Or two hours later do the same thing. All the while knowing that that's what's going to happen. But the grasping in that moment is just too strong, and I just don't see it. We all do that very often.

The Buddha spoke a great deal, in very graphic terms sometimes, about the perils of sense pleasures, the dangers that there are in them. He likened them—these are some of the less graphic similes—to something borrowed, because the owner takes it back. Or sense pleasures are like a dream, because when you wake up, they're gone. I want to say a little bit about this: it's not so much to see sense pleasures or pleasant sensation as something bad, or that when one enjoys sense pleasures there should be a sense of guilt or sin, or a lot of our Western conditioning around it. Not that at all.

Or even necessarily that in order to understand, one has to renounce all sense pleasures and go live in a cave in the Himalayas.

I think it's really important to see that the danger is not that pleasant sensation is inherently bad. But when there is contact with the pleasant, with sense pleasure, that underlying tendency of mind to grasp is so strong—it's just so strong—and we're so unused to being mindful of it, it can be so hard to see. It can be so overwhelming that we're so easily cast into blindness from it. It's so easy to get lost in the cycle of grasping and becoming and wanting more and suffering from it. And in doing that, we're unable to see what's really going on. That's the danger.

Just last night, for example, I was driving back home in the evening and it was a lovely clear night. The full moon was just rising in front of me, really big. It was really beautiful—if I had been noticing it. But I was playing a tape on the cassette, and I really only wanted to hear about a one-minute portion on this tape, and I didn't know where it was. So I was going back and forth, back and forth, trying to find this one minute. And I wasn't noticing the moon. I wasn't noticing how I felt. I wasn't noticing the music.

Then I decided to quit going back and forth. I said, well, it must be around here, and I just left it playing. But every time a new section would start, I'd think, "Oh, that's it." "Oh no, it's not." Then I'd sit back, and I didn't enjoy the music that was playing. I would look and go, "Oh yeah, the moon's pretty." And it was a reflex. I wasn't able to appreciate the moon. I wasn't able to appreciate anything because I was grasping after this one little piece of music—one little minute of music. I mean, who cares? But I spent the whole ride doing that. I never heard the piece of music. And I never really appreciated the moon. And this is one little tiny incident in a day of many incidents like that. We like to think that we're a bit more aware, that we're paying attention.

So that's how easily we can get lost in sense pleasures. That wasn't even a pleasure—it was the anticipation of a sense pleasure that I never had. Grasping at sense pleasures just doesn't work. It's like trying to quench thirst with salt water. You just need more and need more and you never get to where you feel satisfied. The danger in sense pleasures is not in the objects themselves, but in not seeing the clinging.

This is a quote from Lama Yeshe: "Most of us do not know what renunciation means. We are disturbed when we hear about giving up attachment to sensual pleasures, which we take to mean having to suffer in order to achieve inner liberation. But renunciation does not mean that we must give up happiness or that it is desirable to suffer. On the contrary, our aim is to achieve a state beyond suffering. The aim of most of our daily lives is to try to satisfy each desire as it arises, day after day, month after month, year after year. We try to achieve happiness by perpetuating something that is essentially transitory. This expectation, stemming from a misconception, can never be fulfilled and is therefore totally irrational."

And so it's also not to fall into the other extreme of fearing contact with something pleasant. "Oh my God, if I experience a pleasant sensation I'm going to be lost in craving and grasping. I have to go and hide." That's just the flip side. That's just as unbalanced as being lost in craving. Rather, our practice is to develop through mindfulness and clear seeing a balance of mind. A mind that is equanimous, that doesn't need to move toward the pleasant and try to perpetuate it. That doesn't need to flinch back in fear from the unpleasant and try to get away from it. A mind that is steady and not needing to spend its life running back and forth—towards the pleasant and away from the unpleasant.

Suzuki Roshi said that renunciation does not consist in giving up the things of the world, but in accepting that they go away. And that's a mind of balance, a mind that's calm.

In our daily life—not when we're on retreat, but in our daily life, in this culture—we are subjected to such a bombardment of sensual input.

And so much of it is potentially pleasant. It's so easy in our lives to move from one pleasant sensation to the next, to the next. If there's something unpleasant, we can usually find something pleasant to move to, to avoid it. It's such a whirlwind. And we can get so lost in this whirlwind of constantly shifting pleasant sensations that it becomes very difficult in our daily life to be aware and see the process of grasping as it arises, to see how it's bringing on suffering. Because it's very easy to skip from one object when we aren't satisfied by it, to skip on to another object, and to not really stop long enough to see that it's the search itself that's bringing us the suffering.

So here, one of the real benefits of being here is that this environment is so controlled. The sense input is so much more restricted than in our ordinary daily lives. True, the mind can find plenty to grasp at. It just kind of moves from something big like wanting to go to the movies to something little like what time shall I have my cup of tea and how many shall I have today? But it's so much more restricted that it becomes easier to see the process. And this is really valuable.

In our daily lives, it's a rare experience when strong craving arises and turns into grasping, that we say, "Well, I'll just sit here and see what this feels like." We're so conditioned—grasping, right, go for it, do something to get away from it. But if you're sitting here, true, many times grasping comes up in the day and you're halfway through a walking period and suddenly find you're halfway out the door and over to the tea urn before you've noticed it. But many other times you might be sitting in here and a strong thought arises: "Gee, I'd really like to go have that snack I stashed away at lunchtime." But you're not really going to bound up in the middle of the sitting, hopefully, and go out and get the little pack of raisins that you saved for three and a half days and suddenly have to have right now. If nothing else, peer pressure will keep you sitting there.

And so that is a great opportunity to actually experience what grasping feels like—to see that whole process, to sit there and be mindful and feel what grasping is like. You might find that it's unpleasant. You might find that it's really unbalancing. And also that it's okay. It's really not all that terrible. It's quite possible to sit and experience the physical and mental processes of grasping. And from doing that, we learn that we can be with grasping. We don't have to run to a new experience each time grasping arises just in order not to feel the grasping.

And we start to see that a lot of the reason we're driven by grasping is just to get out of that state of grasping itself. What's so pleasant about achieving the desired result? The grasping stops—until the next moment it arises again and then we have to go get something else. So the chance to sit here and be with it, without doing anything about it but just experiencing it with bare attention and mindfulness, is a great opportunity. When it arises, there's no need to curse it but to welcome it as a chance to learn. As we continue to do this over and over, to see this process with mindfulness, understanding begins to grow from this clarity of seeing. And with it also grows equanimity of mind. We begin quite naturally to be able to greet sense objects with detachment.

Now by detachment is not meant a negative quality of aversion or denial, or even a detachment of "Right, I see that object over there and I'm detached from it, equanimous." But detachment meaning really a dissolving of the attachment—that sense of equanimity, of peace. The Buddha said, "Through dispassion one is freed."

The second area of grasping—the first one being sense desire, sense pleasures—is grasping at views. And this also is a huge area. By views is meant the tendency of mind that leads one to think, "This alone is true; everything else is false." And this, again, is blinding. We do it a lot. To hold to any one view, any view at all, limits our world. It limits the possibilities of what we can see, what we can understand, what we can experience and know. Because we tend to accept only the facts that corroborate our already held view. The stronger we're grasping onto the view, the harder it is for us to accept any evidence that goes against it.

It's easy to see how this works in the world of politics. I thought of it a lot watching the presidential debates, where the two men would just sit there spouting out their views, with no sense of a meeting, of really listening—"Oh, well, maybe what you say might be true."

And you'd sit there watching, and they couldn't both be true. One doubted if either of it was true. And there was certainly no sense of trying to open up the views of either person to let in what the other was saying. Just a very rigidly defined world. The whole effort seemed to be to get everyone who was listening to buy into one person's view or the other, without any sense of real questioning. It was scary, actually. I found it scary.

The Buddha told a story about how views can so blind us that we can't see the truth when it confronts us directly. There was a man who was a widower with a young son, about five years old. Once when the man was out and the son was home, some robbers came and burned down his house and the whole village, and kidnapped his son. The man came back and saw this whole ruin, and he found a little charred corpse. He assumed it was his son and was incredibly upset—wailing and moaning, really beside himself. He had the little corpse cremated and had a very nice bag made for the ashes, which he took with him everywhere. He couldn't get over it. He carried the grief and lamenting with him everywhere he went. It felt as though his life were ruined. Eventually he rebuilt his house and continued living, but in total misery.

One night, some months later, his son, who had escaped from the robbers, found his way back to his father's new house and was knocking on the door about midnight. The man was yelling, "Who's out there?" The boy said, "Father, it's I, your son." The man said, "Impossible, my son's dead." "No, father, really, it's I, your son. I've escaped, I've come back." But the man was so locked in his view of what had happened that he said, "No way are you my son. I have my son's ashes here. Go away." He wouldn't come down. He wouldn't open the door. He drove his son away and never saw him again.

This story shows how strongly we can be caught in views that we create ourselves, unable to open to what is true if it doesn't corroborate our view. And we do this all the time in sitting. How often are you sitting

here and have a certain kind of experience, and you think, "Oh, so that's what a good sitting is. That's what good concentration means." In that moment, there's a view. All those experiences in that sitting come to mean "good concentration." And if that is grasped onto, adhered to, then all other experiences are going to be judged by that view.

Now, that sitting might have had nothing to do with good concentration—it might have just been pleasant. Or even if it did have to do with good concentration, holding onto that sense of it, that view of it, is going to blind one to any further or different experience, because one is trying to recreate what one views as good concentration. And how often do we do that, just in a single sitting?

There are many stories in the suttas about people coming to the Buddha and questioning him about all the different teachers around at the time, who all professed different views and different explanations of the universe and of teaching and of Dharma. They always wanted him to say which one was right, which one was wrong, which one he agreed with. And he would never get involved in any of them. He would never associate himself with any view. He'd say it's because holding to any opinion, any belief, brings conflict. It brings contention. It brings conflict both with others and within our own self.

One thing he said is that people with views just go around annoying one another. Because when you have a view, then you have to prove it to somebody who doesn't agree with you, or you have to uphold it, or you have to convince them, or they have to convince you. And it just leads to conflict. At its ultimate level, we can see it leads to wars. It's really scary, the power of grasping at views.

It leads to conflict within ourselves, within our own mind, too. Just again, back to the examples of sitting and how easily we can form a view from something that happens and grasp onto it.

It can be the view, "I'm not having many emotions arising, I must be suppressing, I'm doing something wrong." It can also be the view, "I'm having too many emotions arising, I'm not mindful enough, I'm doing something wrong." Or, "Oh, finally, here's bliss. This is what it's supposed to be like." And then the whole rest of one's retreat is spent trying to recreate that state of bliss.

As soon as one has formulated a view and grasped at it—and it's the grasping that brings the suffering—one is in conflict with oneself. The view that "this is what my experience is like, I'm suppressing emotions, I'm not doing it right" is in conflict with other views that we hold of how it should be done. They don't go together, and we suffer. We're in conflict. We do this all the time.

As soon as we can see a view and let go of it, the tendency is very strong to adopt another one in its place. I watch this in my practice all the time, on just real subtle levels. I'll be sitting, noting, watching things happen, and I'll hit a certain point where the noting is going very fluidly and it feels good. It usually feels good for a view to arise that "this is how it's supposed to be"—so that's always a good one to watch out for. I think, "Oh, that's it. Okay, now I've got it." And then it won't go that way anymore. It'll start to be more difficult. I'll start to suffer. And in that suffering, I'll look a little closer and I'll see, "Oh yeah, I had grasped

onto that as a view." I let it go, and in the next moment: "But now, this is how it really is." I've watched that over and over and over again.

As Thich Nhat Hanh writes: "Sometimes somewhere you take something to be the truth. If you cling to it so much, when the truth comes in person and knocks at your door, you will not open it. Guarding knowledge is not a good way to understand. Understanding means to throw away your knowledge. You have to be able to transcend your knowledge the way people climb a ladder. If you are on the fifth step of a ladder and think that you are very high, there is no hope for you to climb to the sixth. The technique is to release. The Buddhist way of understanding is always letting go of our views and knowledge in order to transcend. This is the most important teaching."

So again, it's not that views in themselves are inherently harmful or inherently cause suffering. It's just important to recognize them when they arise as views, and not to grasp at them as manifestations of the truth. To see when there's a view in the mind, and to see when grasping arises to that view. When we don't see the grasping, suddenly we have a new truth that we're guiding our life by. This is not a rejection of knowledge, not a rejection of methods of practice. They can certainly serve, and we are certainly using them, as skillful means. But we must see them for what they are and not grasp onto them and get lost in that.

The Buddha said, "One who is freed does not concur, does not dispute with anyone. She or he employs the speech currently used in the world without misapprehending it." So it's not that we say, "Well, I don't have anything to do with views. I don't have anything to do with a sense of 'I'"—and so we can't even relate to people. There's no other way to relate than by using our common speech. But we don't misunderstand and misapprehend a view to be the truth.

In our practice here, it's simply to know when a view has arisen, to see it as a view, to know if there's grasping in the mind to that view or if there's no grasping in the mind. This applies to views about everything—about truth, about practice, about enlightenment. As the Third Zen Patriarch said, "Do not search for the truth, only cease to cherish opinions."

The other two fields of grasping I don't really have time to talk about much; I'll just mention them. The third one is grasping at rites and rituals, which can be explained as having the idea that one can make oneself perfect, and then grasping at external, outward behaviors—rituals, rites—in order to become perfect.

And that's different from a committed investigation of the actual nature of mind and body to come to know the truth. It's simply looking at what's actually going on rather than grasping at a particular ritual to make oneself perfect. This is not obviously to discard method and technique—they're clearly valuable tools—but also not to mistake, in the Zen parable, the finger pointing at the moon for the moon itself.

The fourth field of grasping is a huge one: grasping at the self-idea, the idea of "I," which could be several

whole talks in itself. This is defined as considering the ever-changing world in the light of a permanent, unchanging essence—as if there's some permanent, unchanging self that's considering the world. It can also be seen as the latent, underlying tendency to identify with any experience whatsoever that comes up. It's not as if there's a solid self-idea sitting there, but rather this latent tendency that arises very frequently—to grasp onto something, identify with it, and make a self.

For example, just an easy example in your sitting: there's an unpleasant sound. There's contact—a sound. It's unpleasant. Aversion arises. And that aversion is grasped onto. In that grasping, that feeding of it, the aversion turns into anger. It gets really full-blown. More grasping, and it becomes "my anger." "I'm really angry at that person for moving and destroying my concentration in this sitting." And it can go on and on—either building up to self-justification about what a jerk that person is and how right I am, or the other side, self-condemnation: "They're doing the best they can, I have no right to be angry, I'm such a horrible person after all."

Either way, moving from that grasping, isolating out that particular experience of unpleasantness and aversion, and through that grasping comes all the construction and buildup. How solid has the sense of "me," of self, become in that moment of self-justification or self-condemnation? The "I" is very solid in that moment, constructed through the process of grasping and identifying with a particular experience. This tendency of grasping and identification with experience is so strong. This is the grasping at the "I" idea, the self-idea. As I said, this is a huge topic, and I just want to mention it quickly here.

If that aversion is not grasped at—even if it is grasped a little and moves to anger, but then the grasping is seen and let go—the anger will be there for a while as experience, and then it just kind of dissolves or floats away or turns into something else. And the sense of self is not nearly so strong. It fades out with the identification, perhaps to arise again in the next moment with the next grasping and identification.

Again, I just want to emphasize that this is not about condemning the quality of grasping or judging ourselves when we find that we're really caught in grasping. Actually, at that moment, that would itself be identification with the grasping. What we're doing here is simply using this opportunity that we have—a rare opportunity for most of us—to begin to be able to see this process. To see how powerful it is and to respect that. To see its arising, and through that seeing, and through the times that we get caught, to begin to understand how blinding it is. Through the mindfulness of it, when it arises, through that seeing, wisdom also arises. And the bondage of grasping can begin to weaken. It can begin to arise less strongly.

This is Krishnamurti: "We are forever craving something, and having tasted many things which were mostly unsatisfactory, we now want the ultimate thing—God, truth, or what you will. We want a result, a new experience, a new sensation that will endure in spite of everything. We never see the futility of result, but only of a particular result. So we wander from one result to another, hoping always to find the one that will end the search."

And so it's possible, through this practice of mindfulness, through seeing the process of the search and the

suffering that comes from the grasping, to end the search. Through this investigation, through this practice of mindfulness that we're all engaged in.

"Because when they understand their sense activity, the stillness fills them with delight. They see just what contact does. And so their craving ends. They realize the total calm."

It really inspires me to feel that this is a possibility for all of us—to really understand through our clear seeing and mindfulness this process. The process of contact. The process of grasping. And to begin to realize calm and peace.

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