Exploring Craving

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:02:07

So last time I spoke, I talked about generosity. I thought I would talk about the opposite this time, which is exploring the experience of craving and clinging.

The whole point I want to make is not that we hate craving, not that we're afraid of it, not that we're some kind of failure if you happen to notice it on the odd occasion arising in your mind. It is actually simply another avenue of exploration to which we can bring wise attention, right attitude. It's just as much an object of exploration and a possibility for opening into wisdom as anything else, if we meet it with right attitude. That's the way I want to frame it and, hopefully, inspire that in you.

It's true that the Buddha talked about the experience of awakening. He said, "The sublime truth has been discovered by the Tathagata, namely liberation through non-clinging." That's really quite a profound and powerful statement: liberation through non-clinging. I just love that way of speaking about liberation or awakening because it's not pointing to a specific state. It's not as if non-clinging is some static state. It's more a moment-to-moment activity of mind and heart where clinging either doesn't arise or is released. It's a moment-to-moment experiential possibility. It's not about thinking of some state of bliss and holding on, trying to get there. No, that's not liberation through non-clinging.

Liberation through non-clinging is not so sexy sounding, really. It doesn't sound so exciting. In fact, it's hard to actually make up in our minds what that might feel like or look like—which is great. Because when we make up in our minds what something should feel like or look like, we're immediately caught in trying to make that happen. Clinging. Forget about it. Liberation through non-clinging.

So I want to talk about specifically what, in my understanding, we mean in Buddhism by the experience of craving and clinging, and what we don't mean by it, and how we can explore it with sati-pañña, with mindfulness and wisdom, right at the moment of its arising, at the moment of seeing it. Not that we have to throw up our hands and hide in the corner thinking, "It's hopeless, I'm hopeless, all I'm seeing is so much craving, forget it." A moment of non-clinging is only as far away as that. I don't want to say there's hope because I don't think hope is particularly helpful—that's looking into the future. But the potential is in any moment if we're willing to really explore, to get interested.

The moment clinging kind of releases itself, or when our mind just stops making sense of it—the wise intention the Buddha spoke of that's the opposite of craving, of greed, of clinging—is renunciation, which of course moves into generosity in a more active way.

In our culture, our regular secular culture, it's funny: if you talk about wanting or craving and

renunciation, it's almost as if, without exploring, we hold backwards views of both of them. Wanting—well, of course I want this and I want that, that's normal, that's where happiness lies. We can almost imagine or impute, without looking, a kind of pleasure inherent in wanting, which is of course sick, as we know when we look at it more closely. But when we don't look, it's as if it's leading us in. And renunciation is like, "Oh, you know, dried up old stick, avoidance, aversion"—as if that's the best you can do, some kind of penance, suffering basically.

That's exactly the distorted perception the Buddha was talking about. Because it's the craving, the clinging, that in itself is the source and experience of suffering if we look at it. You don't even have to say it's going to make us suffer. It in itself is actually a state of suffering. This is my opinion, and I hope it inspires you to just look for yourself.

And renunciation, which isn't like, "Oh bad, I can't have something," pushing it away with aversion—renunciation is the opening into non-clinging. It's actually an experience of great simplicity, joy, peace, release. It's a very wholesome, happy moment, renunciation. In a way, the culture has it all backwards, and that's kind of what we've grown up with.

In some of the interviews, a question that comes up often is a kind of conceptual confusion about what we mean by wanting, what we mean by craving. We might say, "Well, if craving's bad, if clinging is the source of suffering, what's wrong with wanting to have a better job? Or what's wrong with wanting to take care of my family? Or even what's wrong with loving to be in nature?"

You see in those questions, the first thing is all the focus is outward, on the object. "What's wrong with wanting this particular object?" The answer is: nothing. It's got nothing whatsoever to do with the thing wanted. That's one thing.

The second thing is that in English, the words "want" or "desire" actually cover various mental states. In Pali, the language the Buddhist texts were originally written in, the words are much more specific, talking about really particular states of mind.

The word that is usually translated as "craving," as in the second noble truth—the source of suffering—is described this way: "Just this craving, which brings renewal of being and is accompanied by pleasure, by lust, finding delight now here and now there." I love that description because that's how craving is. It's accompanied by pleasure, finding delight now here and now there. That's how we get seduced into thinking the craving itself is the thing bringing us into happiness.

That word translated as "craving"—the Pali word *taṇhā*—is a very specific mental factor. The closer translation is "thirst."

So when we're talking about the wanting or desire as a form of suffering in the second noble truth, it's this quality of mind of thirst—leaning into what comes after pleasant experience. The mind leans into it. *I want it. I need it. I've got to have it.* That quality.

And clinging—there's a description somewhere in the suttas that craving, this tanha, is like a thief entering a dark house at night and searching for an object to steal. And the clinging, upadana in Pali, grasping, is like actually grabbing the thing. So when we talk about craving and clinging, craving is that thirsting, that *got to have it*, leaning into it. And the grasping is holding—*now I got you*—holding on for dear life, which leads to a sense of becoming, the person who has this thing, renewal of being, and then suffering.

So the craving, which I just read in the second noble truth, continues: with the arising of craving, there's the arising of clinging. With the cessation of craving, there's the cessation of clinging. And then the Buddha talks about four areas, four big areas of clinging that we can explore. Just one of his nice ways of breaking experience down.

I'm only going to talk really about three. Clinging to sense pleasures, to sensual pleasures—that's obvious, maybe. Clinging to views and opinions, which is huge. Clinging to rules and observances, which I'm not really going to talk about too much, but this refers to things like bathing in the Ganges to purify all your past bad karma. The Buddha is saying that's not really worth clinging to. So don't go bathe in the Ganges and think it's going to help. And the fourth is clinging to a doctrine of self, basically clinging to sakkaya-ditthi, which is identity view, personality view. So clinging to views and clinging to personality views. I'll talk about that more.

But first I want to elaborate a little about the attitude that we hopefully bring to all of our mindfulness practice. If already, just in hearing me read this about craving and clinging, or the different kinds, you notice any reaction or recoiling from it, or a sense of *I can't ever understand this*, or just any kind of reactivity like that—just notice it, that's all.

But hold the open possibility that we can really bring the spark of interest, investigation, to what it's like when there's craving, when there's clinging in the mind, in the heart, in our experience. What it's like when it's not. So that we can actually get interested in seeing for ourselves. Because that's the only way wisdom really arises—seeing for ourselves. Is it true that craving and clinging is a source of suffering in your mind, in your heart, in your life?

Just taking it on because the Buddha says it must be true, as we know, might get us looking. But it doesn't really cut it in terms of freeing our heart and mind from the habit, the seduction of craving—this going with pleasure now here and now there, landing with delight now here and now there. That is so seductive, and it gets so subtle, that we keep getting kind of tricked by it again and again, even when we've seen for ourselves. So it's really worth exploring.

And the way to explore it—I think it was Buddhadasa, the Thai teachers often talk about meeting any moment of experience with sati-pañña, mindfulness-wisdom, at the sense door. Mindfulness is just that bare recognition of what's happening. Wisdom is that attitude of mind that's interested, without judging, without assuming, without craving or aversion. *Oh, clinging. It feels like this. Oh, clinging again. Clinging*

feels like this. Not *clinging and I like it, so we're not going to look too closely.* No. *Clinging feels like this.* This is the whole wise attitude that is our entire practice.

We can actually meet even the so-called source of suffering, craving, with mindfulness-wisdom, so that it simply becomes our practice of freedom. It's not like we have to get rid of it. We can bring that awareness so that we're actually practicing non-clinging in the very moment we meet the experience of clinging. That's where our freedom lies—right here, right now, in how the mind and heart is meeting experience.

Sayadaw U Tejaniya, the last time I saw him, he gets on different rants. So this was a particular rant he was on, because every time I saw him this last month, he kept saying the same thing. He does that. But this is a clear little thing. What's the difference between someone who practices and someone who doesn't? Someone who practices, a practitioner, meets or regards every object, every experience that happens as: *What can I learn from this?*

Something to learn from. And he was in the middle of a very ongoing, complicated, very difficult, very painful situation about his whole life in his monastery. So he wasn't just talking through his hat—well, they don't have hats. He wasn't just saying it for the heck of it. He was in the middle of a very difficult situation, saying, "I'm really interested to see how my mind reacts to this. I'm really interested to see." He said, "It's like an exam. It's an exam. It's a really difficult situation to see how free my mind is." And he meant it. He said someone who's not a practitioner, someone who's not really used to looking, they meet or respond or react to every situation with greed or hatred or delusion, or a combination. So that's really the attitude we bring—the interest.

When we begin to explore and continue to explore craving, the main thing is to recognize, to turn the attention around. It's about the state, the mental state, the emotional state in the mind and heart—not about whether this object is worthy or appropriate to cling to or not. That's how we get completely sidetracked. Then we get into those discussions: "Well, but it's appropriate to take care of my family. It's appropriate."

So again, back to different words. There's another word in Pali: chanda. It's ethically neutral, meaning dependent on how it's used, it can be a kusala—wholesome, skillful—state of mind, or an unskillful one. Chanda is complicated—there are two huge pages in the English-Pali dictionary—but I'm just cutting it down. It roughly translates as excitement, as willingness to do, the energy to do something. So it can be just kind of neutral. There's chanda to do what you need to do. That's not the same as craving or clinging.

In a wholesome way, chanda is one of the four bases of success, and it's translated as zeal—this real energy and willingness to do, together with concentration, together with virtue, to really explore. That's a wholesome quality, this zeal.

Now, in an unwholesome way, the same word chanda is put together with kama—not karma, but another kama, which means sense pleasures. And so this kama-chanda is translated as the excitement of sense

pleasures. So guess what? That's not particularly skillful or wholesome. It's actually the first hindrance—kama-chanda. It's not just huge desire. The first of the five hindrances is actually this excitement of sense pleasures, the craving that comes from that.

But this word chanda, I think, can cover a lot of the times when we're thinking, "But what's wrong with wanting to enjoy the beauty of nature? What's wrong with it?" Nothing's wrong with it. No one's saying there's anything wrong with it. But even as there's chanda, or just a simple motivation to act, to do what needs to be done out of compassion, out of generosity, out of wisdom—the same object could also be related to, in a moment, with huge craving or clinging.

So take dinner. Take enlightenment. Either one. Yes, there's chanda—the body's hungry, it's time to go eat. And there could be a sense of it being pleasant; that's fine. It doesn't have to be thirst, it doesn't have to be craving. The body needs to eat; that's normal. But of course it could be craving, couldn't it? And in that situation, I'm imagining that you can all even call up in your mind what the difference would feel like, right? When you're really craving for the meal versus when it's just hungry and time to go? You can feel the difference—yes? That's not too esoteric, right?

Now, take the idea of enlightenment, because that's all it is—an idea in the moment. Sometimes there can be a huge craving, like a real craving, and it's huge suffering. Believe me, I've been there—the suffering of "I really want to be enlightened." And you come in and talk about it, and I say, "Well, what's wrong with wanting to be enlightened? That's why we're doing this whole stupid practice."

How can you say that that's a source of suffering? And you see then it's not about enlightenment. It's not about following the teachings. This is where we turn around and look at what's the state in the mind and heart right now. That's when you see the difference between *chanda*, between interest, between motivation—and craving or clinging.

So we really want to explore. And to explore, it really is to bring in this mindfulness with wisdom. If you're exploring while already judging—"Oh no, I'm craving for enlightenment, so forget it"—there's no way to see clearly. That's one of the drawbacks. That's one of the dangers, you could say, in craving. When it's coloring the mind that's observing, we don't see clearly.

In terms of the opposite of craving—the natural state that it transforms into—is the wise intention of renunciation. Again, it's not something that we need to force through aversion. "Oh, I have to give up everything." Renunciation is the natural expression of wisdom in the moment when the mindfulness, the wisdom sees through. Say it's wanting enlightenment. You see, "Oh, that's craving, craving, craving, craving." It drops away. It's got nothing to do with whether you get enlightened or not. The craving just drops away. And there's a renouncing. You're not renouncing enlightenment. You're not even renouncing—it happens by itself. That's what's so great about wisdom. It sees through, and when the delusion drops, it sees accurately. The Tibetans like to say things self-liberate. The craving vanishes because it doesn't make any sense. It's just, "Oh, right, there's no need to crave that." And there's peace.

The natural peace and ease, as Sylvia likes to quote Ajahn Amaro, that's always available.

What's so poignant about craving is that it hides this peace. If we weren't caught in the craving—"Oh, it's just like this." But then, "How can I hold it?" And it's gone. "Oh, it's gone. See, it couldn't stay. That just shows I've got to work harder. I've got to hold on to it. I've got to practice." Or, "It's just like enlightenment. I've got to just let the question go." And there's peace and ease. And then the mind goes, "But that didn't solve it. I'm not enlightened." And it all starts up again.

So, continuing to be willing to bring in this quality of interest, of exploring, of investigation. "Oh no, craving again—it feels like this."

The Buddha often speaks in terms of exploring craving and the suffering and the ending of it. Bhikkhu Bodhi described it as three movements in an unfolding process of insight. The Buddha talks about this a lot, and I think it's really helpful to explore it in our own experience, on retreat, off retreat. He talks about seeing with wisdom, as it really is, the gratification in clinging to sense pleasures, views, *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*—t he gratification in clinging, the danger in the clinging, and the escape from the suffering. Not to hold this as a view or an opinion,

but to really look, because it makes a lot of sense. The Buddha says, "If, monks, there were no gratification in the world"—and here he's talking about sense pleasures—"if there were no gratification in the world, beings would not become enamored with the world. But because there is gratification, beings become enamored. If there were no danger in the world, beings would not become disenchanted with the world, would not suffer. But because there is danger, beings become disenchanted with it. If there were no escape from this suffering, beings could not escape. But as there is an escape, beings can escape."

It sounds obvious, but it's really quite a useful template for exploring our experience. Especially when we start talking about clinging to sense pleasures—we tend to jump right away to the danger of sense pleasures, which the Buddha talked about endlessly. This skips over the fact that of course there is gratification. And if we haven't really acknowledged to ourselves, really felt the gratification, then when we start looking at the dangers we somehow don't completely buy it. It doesn't completely sink in, because—but, but, but—it *is* nice. It *is* lovely to have chocolate ice cream, unless you're allergic to chocolate and don't like ice cream, and then you can have soy coconut or whatever. It is lovely to go out in nature and appreciate it. I don't have to enumerate the sense pleasures; you all know them well enough. Including pleasant states of mind, including all the wonderful things in life.

The Buddha's not saying that stuff doesn't bring pleasure. It does. It gratifies us. And so part of bringing mindfulness, wisdom, and really exploring is to start right there with the gratification—to see how and why the clinging starts, because it feels good. We've talked about it. It feels good on that very basic level. So being willing not to jump over it—thinking, "No, it shouldn't feel good," or being afraid to feel good because then we'll get caught in clinging. You can't skip that piece. It's really just seeing as it is, the gratification. Yeah, it feels good. Then the danger, the escape.

The gratification I will leave you to explore by yourself. I'm sure you can figure out how to do that.

The danger is—again, I'm saying this stuff so it's conceptual, but in your experience, not. Don't bring in some idea of danger. "Yeah, it's bad, it's going to go away, so therefore I shouldn't enjoy it." That doesn't help. That's a view. That's an idea. That's a description. I'm talking about just moment to moment, bare attention to just what happens. What happens as you're really enjoying the gratification of something?

There are different dangers. The one that's always mentioned is, of course, the one we've talked about before—that nothing lasts. So there's gratification. It's lovely. It goes away. Now, if the mind is completely free and at ease, there won't be clinging around the gratification when it goes away. That's not a problem. The danger is just to the clinging, to the suffering mind. When there's no clinging, change isn't a problem.

So that's one danger—that we tend to rely on feeling good. And when we don't feel good, as we know, maybe we at least have a little hissy fit, if not worse.

But actually—and this is me now, what I see for myself—what I think is really more of a danger, more subtle, more broad, more comprehensive, is the addictive, delusory aspect of craving when it's not seen in the mind. It colors the moment of awareness. Just what I was saying about reading the definition of the second noble truth—craving, coming together with pleasure, delighting in this, delighting in that—without just noticing wanting as it is, it bears the promise that it's going to be the avenue to happiness. And then we tend to focus outward on the object desired and think, "Well, that one didn't do it." So we think, "Okay, I'll renounce this or I'll renounce that." But that seduction of the wanting, of that being the path leading us onward—to me this is one of the delusory aspects that leads into the addictive quality of it.

The other thing it does—the Tibetans have a lovely phrase for how it colors our perception. They say that wanting, clinging, "puts feathers on the object that's desired." It kind of colors it up. When you really have this desire for something, doesn't that thing, or person, or job, just seem so wonderful? How many expectations and fantasies have you had about some future thing since you've been here? Not even way far in the future—it could just be lunch. Or it could just be how nice it's going to be to take a bath at a certain time.

And if you've really gotten into how pleasant a fantasy can be – you may have had unpleasant ones too, but just staying with the pleasant – if you really get into it, and then you get to do the thing, does it really, really, does the thing at all come up to the promise of the fantasy? You probably keep looking, right, until you find one that does. But keep looking, don't believe me.

I know now when my mind starts saying, "Oh, it'll be like this, and then it'll be like that, and then this will be so wonderful," painting it out in twenty-five different ways – I know that whatever way my mind makes it up, it's going to be other than that. It never, ever comes out the way my mind has made it up. But that sense of the desire itself makes the object or the experience desired look so incredibly wonderful.

Even deep meditative experiences. You're waiting for *pīti* to arise, rapture to arise, and then it starts, and

it's on and on and on, and finally it's like, "Please, God, make it stop." That may sound like I'm exaggerating, but not really. Everything gets old by repetition. And so you need something new if we're under that promise of clinging making us happy.

And even more, there's the delusion, because craving and aversion only arise in a moment of mind and heart when there's delusion. I talked a little about delusion today. Delusion always goes with craving or aversion, which are like two sides of the same thing. Aversion is like not wanting something to be happening. Because there's the delusion of me – without me, there's not anything to crave, right? Or to be aversive to. And also the delusion that it will make me happy.

So the real poignancy of craving, I think, is what I said before: it actually hides the peace, the ease, the freedom that the heart and mind is really looking for, although maybe it doesn't know it.

Huang Po wrote: "This pure mind shines forever with the radiance of its own perfection. The one mind is the Buddha, and there's no distinction between Buddhas and ordinary beings except that ordinary beings are attached to forms and thus seek for Buddhahood outside of themselves. By this very seeking they lose it."

Even take it away from Buddhahood – just non-clinging, just a moment of freedom, of ease, of peace. We really do look for it outside of ourselves, don't we? To people, to objects, to experiences, to a different mental state, to anything. And by that very seeking, by that even very subtle leaning into something else, it hides the natural peace and ease. And so to me, that is the real danger of clinging. It promises us exactly what it cannot deliver because in its own essence, the essence of the mental state is that it hides peace.

What I love about the fact that experience is just this moment opening up, just this moment opening up, is that whatever this moment is like, now it's opening up. And so there's always the potential – you can be totally caught in craving, and then in this moment, "Oh, craving is like this." Always that potential. It doesn't have to be ten years from now or when you've cultivated a certain level of absorption. It's just that recognition: oh, craving is like this.

The escape in a moment – not the escape of the arhat, who has so thoroughly seen through the seduction of craving that it just stops arising because it doesn't make sense – but we can know moments of that. And how do we know it doesn't make sense? When we notice clinging.

This is what's great to experiment with on retreat. You start going, "I shouldn't want this," or "I'm not going to look around," or "I shouldn't go eat." Not feeding the craving is helpful. But it's not like a friend of mine who decided to really practice restraint at the sense doors on retreat, so he walked around blindfolded for three days. That's not really seeing through the dangers of craving.

When it arises and you recognize it, never mind what the craving is about. Never mind, it doesn't matter. Turn the attention back around. See: oh, craving feels like this. Notice how you even know it's there in the mind, in the body. Notice what effect it has on your mind, on your perceptions, on your choices, on how

you feel about things. Just really explore it.

Sometimes in walking meditation, sitting meditation, eating meditation, working meditation, you can just watch it arise and get so strong. It's so strong that it's telling you if you don't have this, you'll die. Some people have brought this up – it can be as simple a thing as wanting to look at the person walking next to you. Have you felt that? It's so strong you want to look. Like, you just can't not do it, right? For what?

So you can judge, right, basically. So you can look at them and have a judgment. That was really good. I'm glad I did that. The wanting though—it's killer. So it's understandable to see why we're driven by it.

So explore it. Wanting. "I'm going to explode!" You just stand there with it and watch it. At some point it ebbs. I'm not saying how long, but at some point it ebbs. At some point it really goes away. Notice it's really gone. Sure, another one's going to come because that's the nature of the habits of our mind. But we can really see, oh yeah, this is really interesting. What does it do?

And one of the things it does that I've noticed, besides putting feathers on the object and making the thing look so—if I just look at that person, everything's going to be so much better. It doesn't make sense, but never mind. If we just had, I don't know, some certain thing for lunch, then you have it. You don't even like it. You're not even hungry that day, but never mind.

But another thing wanting does is really narrow. It really constricts the mind so that what we see is the object of desire and everything else is in the way, sometimes. So again, it engenders a displeasure, a discontent with the perfection of now, with now at all. Now isn't good enough.

And this example I've used often, because it's funny and it's easy to see. I was once sitting on a plane—I travel a lot—and it was an overnight flight to Europe. I was sitting on the aisle with two seats empty next to me. I can't sleep on these flights where you sit up all night, and I'm a wreck when I don't sleep. So I was waiting, people getting on, getting on. And it was getting close to the end, and I noticed no one was in the two seats next to me. That was just a perception. I just noticed that. And immediately, the thought arose: maybe I'll get to lie down. And with that thought, I really saw this incredible clinging, a craving to lie down and the clinging to the idea.

Before, I had just been sitting and watching people come in. And from that moment, everyone who came through the door of the plane—I was looking at them. I was feeling, you know, not hatred, but definitely aversion. Then they'd go past me. Oh, may you be happy! And this is true.

Actually, I noticed I really don't remember what happened. I probably didn't get to lie down. I really don't remember. But watching what the craving did to my mind, the effect it had on my experience, on the people, on how I related to everything in my experience—there's no question that it's suffering, much more suffering than lying down or not. That may be debatable. You have to explore that for yourself.

Ajahn Chah says, *kāmogha*, a flood of sensuality. We're sunk in sights, in sounds, in smells, in tastes, in

bodily sensations. And we're sunk because we look only at externals. We don't look inwardly. So our whole practice is this learning to look inwardly, not to judge, not to try and make it different, but to understand, to get interested, to explore, to see how it works.

Shankara, who was a seventh-century Indian philosopher, one of the main teachers of Advaita Vedanta, said—and it's really true—he said craving is intensified when we let our thoughts and our attention dwell upon sense objects and seek temporary satisfaction in the objective world. The Buddha says the same thing. He says what feeds unwise attention, what feeds the growth of the hindrance of sense desire, is to keep focusing our attention—and this is why it's unwise attention—to keep focusing our attention on the gratification, on how good it feels, basically, of the sense pleasure.

So, just a simple example, like my thing with the airplane seats. As long as I'm thinking, "Oh, that would be so nice to lie down," then immediately, "No, no, no, you can't!" Every person who came in becomes the enemy. Yeah, it really would be nice to lie down. But if you don't focus on that—you had that thought, "it would be nice to lie down," but you just withdraw your attention from focusing on that—it doesn't feed the sense desire.

It doesn't mean you can't lie down if you have the option. It doesn't mean you can't go choose what you like to eat. But we don't have to keep focusing: "That would be so nice. This tastes so good. Let me have more." So explore. That's what the Buddha calls unwise attention—it feeds it.

This habit of unwise attention is what has fed and so deeply made these deep ruts of aversion to the unpleasant, of clinging to the pleasant, and just spacing out with delusion in the neutral. We can see this in our present moment experience.

There's a sutta on the two darts that has so much profound teaching in it. The Buddha is talking about how if you're hit with a dart—an unpleasant feeling—an awakened person is just hit with that dart, that unpleasant feeling. An unawakened person beats and screams and yells and laments, adding a second unpleasant feeling, basically mental distress to the physical.

But then he goes on from that. Having been touched by a painful feeling, an uninstructed, ordinary worldling resists it and resents it. So then, in one who resists and resents a painful feeling—can you relate to that at all?—the underlying tendency, the habit of resistance to the painful, comes to underlie the mind. It becomes a habit.

And under the impact of that painful feeling and the habit to resist it, the person proceeds to enjoy sensual happiness. Why? Because an untaught worldling does not know of any other escape from painful feelings except the enjoyment of sense happiness. I think that's really quite profound to explore in ourselves. When there's an unpleasant feeling, we go for sense happiness because that's all an uninstructed person knows.

So then the underlying tendency to lust for pleasant feelings comes to underlie the mind. The person does

not know, according to facts, the arising and ending of these feelings—not saying they're bad, just knowing that pleasant feelings arise and end. Does not know, according to facts, the gratification, the danger, and the escape connected with these feelings. So in one who lacks that knowledge, the underlying tendency to ignorance regarding neutral feelings also comes to underlie the mind.

I've found that in my own exploring so useful—just to see, and again, not with judging. All of this exploration is really to see how the mind works, how these habits get fed, how they get starved, and whether we really experience suffering, disconnection, confusion as a result of them. If we're judging them or ourselves, there's no way to see clearly.

So look in simple ways. The body hurts and the mind goes into a pleasant fantasy. Right there. Painful feeling—let's check out, let's go take a beach vacation. You're home and you go to the refrigerator. You go have a cup of tea. You go make a phone call. No one's saying any of those things are bad. See how our mind goes, "Oh, that's bad. You shouldn't do it. I should renounce." That's just aversion. Explore.

You go and get a bite of ice cream—I must want ice cream tonight, it keeps coming up. Well, how does it unfold? You start with one bite and you end up eating the whole carton of Häagen-Dazs because when you finish that bite, the body hurts again. So you have to have another bite, and the body hurts again, so you have to eat the whole carton. Then your stomach really hurts and you can't eat anymore, so there's something else to do.

Just explore. Is that true sometimes? In the face of the unpleasant, the mind—the uneducated mind—knows of no other escape than to go for the pleasant. So what we're saying is: turn around and look.

There is an escape, and it isn't about going for the pleasant. It's simply bringing clear attention. "Oh, wanting is like this. Desire is like this. Burning, burning, burning, burning." And then, "Oh, okay, now it's gone." Then notice—ah, the peace and ease.

Really, you know, when we get what we want, there's that sense of relaxation, that peace and ease. But we mistakenly think it's because we got what we wanted. Actually, it's because the wanting went away.

It's a lot easier not to have to run around. My brother has a hound dog with such a finely developed sense of smell. The poor thing is just driven by his nose, absolutely driven by it. He comes in the house, and any piece of food, anything that's ever touched a human body—they have to hide the garbage, they have to hide everything, because he just can't stay away from it. It's painful to watch. Sweet dog. That's what it's like. He just can't stop. Sense pleasures.

Well, I don't have so much time for views and *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*, so I'll move through them briefly. Attachment to views, and then *sakkāya-diṭṭhi* as personality view.

A view is really a formation of thought, and on one level it's pretty obvious. We can start with, say, a

political view. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to see how a certain political idea gets held as right or better, while another one is deemed wrong. My god, this last year—it was inescapable in this country. Look how much vehemence, how much anger, how much hatred really goes into the supporting of one's view and the attacking of the other view.

So this is not subtle or esoteric. It's really easy to see. We're all different in terms of politics, but I know many people in this country, including myself, who knew it was a view, yet were sincerely and deeply attached to that view as being right. That's attachment to a view—a description of how things are, what it means to me, what's right.

We all have views about many, many things. That's not a problem. The attachment, as it's described, is thinking "this alone is true, everything else is false." But of course, it doesn't quite present itself that way. We just think this is how it is.

In terms of obvious views—philosophical views, religious views, political views, views of your family, views of how other people should behave, views of what's appropriate behavior in your partner, views of who's right and who's wrong—you can sense how much suffering there is when there's attachment, when there's holding to a view as absolutely right.

So that's the big, obvious picture. But views also form out of thoughts based on perception. Not even getting to personality view yet, but just subtle views of what's happening right now—views of the solidity of the body, views of what causes suffering or not.

I'll give a very simple example. A friend of mine—and it's a good example of perception, the construction that our thoughts make of it, clinging right away to that construction as being true, and then all the thoughts and reactions and suffering that come from that.

She was sitting on a retreat in a rented facility in Switzerland many years ago, in an old creaky wooden house. The retreat was with Ajahn Sumedho, I think. On the second floor was the big room that served as their meditation hall, and right below it was the walking hall. It was one of those houses with no insulation, and you could hear everything that went on.

They were in a sitting period, and she said she was getting very concentrated, very quiet, just with the breath. In and out. One of those really peaceful sessions where it's going really well. Then someone started doing walking downstairs, and it was just all this creaking. You know how we are—god forbid there should be a sound when we're meditating. Also, this was Switzerland, so during the sitting period, you sit; during the walking period, you walk. You don't walk during the sitting period. My Swiss friends would be okay with me saying this, right?

So she was getting really agitated. "They're ruining my concentration, and they shouldn't be doing it. It's really clear what you should do." Okay, back to in, out, in, out. But she was getting more and more angry and distressed. Back to in and out. Finally she thought, "Okay, I'm just going to be really present with my

breath." So she really zoomed in on it.

And then she widened her field of awareness and realized that she was sitting leaning against the wall. Every time she took a breath in, her back pressed against the wall and made it creak. That was the sound she was hearing.

So you get a sense.

There's perception. We think we know what it is. We make up a whole story. We then have moods and emotions that go with that, and a sense of me, and we can get quite distressed.

Now in that case, with clear seeing, the whole thing dissolves. The anger—she could have made up another story about how stupid she was, I don't know, she didn't say that—but the whole thing dissolves with accurate perception.

That's how views are formed: from a perception, a thought about it, not recognizing that thought, another thought, a mood that goes with the thought, then selective perception. We just notice the perceptions that fit the view that's been formed, and it just goes on from there.

So I just want to drop this in, in terms of noticing self-judging whenever it comes up in your sittings or your walkings. First noticing it—that's helpful. I would say almost always there's some view operating in the background that is feeding the judging. The judging is comparing something to something, right? And whatever you're comparing, it isn't good enough or you wouldn't be judging. So there might be a view of what good practice is, or how the breath should be, or "I shouldn't be clinging," or "my life should be more about service," or whatever.

So you might just notice—it's so often there are views operating in the background that we're not even recognizing. This is one place where awareness of thoughts can be really useful. I'm not saying think about it, analyze it, go to your room and write seventeen pages about what your views are of proper sitting. But just have a sense—when the self-judging comes, you might just notice one or two of the thoughts that feed it. "Oh, I'm just spacing out. I'm not with the breath as much as I used to be." That's a sign right there. There's a view: how often one should be with the breath, how the breath should feel, a comparison to the past, and selective perception. Because how many times have we said it doesn't matter how much you're with your breath? But the mind doesn't remember that. The mind remembers the discussion about absorption and never moving from the breath. All the other teachings it doesn't remember. Because that's selective perception. That's attachment to view.

Do you get a sense of what I mean? This is happening all the time. We don't have to hate views, just like we don't hate clinging. When we see them, we don't have to cling to them. "Oh yeah, there's that view, that it should be like this"—and the mind opens up.

But also, there are other times when they say practice just has so many different things arising, and you're

just noticing that. Oh, yeah. But then the mind says, "If you should notice it every single second, and I'm spacing out, so that can't be right." Just notice the views when there's judging.

In terms of sakkāya-diṭṭhi—diṭṭhi again just means view, sakkāya-diṭṭhi means personality view—it operates in exactly the same way. The perception of my friend, the perception of the sound, the interpretation that somebody's walking, the aversion to that, the view that everyone should follow the schedule, the view that this is spoiling my meditation, the sense that it's unpleasant and not recognizing that. There's a whole sense of herself in that.

Sakkāya-diṭṭhi is basically that picking up of any particular perception. As we sit, as we walk, as we go through the day, as we've said, it's just a whole flow of nāma-rūpa, of the six sense doors. Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, thinking, or emotions. If you really look, that's all that's happening, over and over and over. Sometimes people say, "Is this all?" Yeah, actually. Seeing, smelling, tasting, touching, sensing, thinking, over and over. That's what's happening.

Once I went in to see Sayadaw U Pandita, who was a very tough teacher. I don't actually remember what I said. That's noting—that's a noting practice. You just note everything that's arising. So you're just noting seeing, hearing, thinking, touching, seeing, hearing. And I must have been complaining. I remember he just looked at me. He was really good at busting me. I kind of liked it.

He goes, "So what do you want? Other objects to note?" Because that's all that's going to happen. You can change these objects for those objects. It really doesn't matter.

So sometimes people have mentioned here it feels like they're in the flow. Things are just going and just noticing, and yeah, that feels great. Why does it feel great? Either because it's pleasant and you're attached to it and not noticing it and it's delusion—that's one way it feels great. When it changes and you're suffering, then you'll know that's why that felt great. Or because things are just coming and going and there's no clinging in the mind. There's no making up a story. There's no making a sense of self. It's just how things are. Pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. Pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. Going, going. That's all. From the time we're born until the time we die. Pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. Pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. Over and over and over. When there's no clinging, it's no problem. Suddenly, though, it's a problem, right?

So Sayadaw U Lakkhana described it as sakkāya—his description of sakkāya just means this stream of experience. And when at one moment any particular perception, any particular experience is suddenly grasped, it's as if the mind suddenly goes, "This one is me or mine." Right then, there's the sense of personality identity, personality view. This is me or mine. Unfortunately, the mind doesn't usually say it quite that clearly, does it? It's like, "Oh my God, this pain is unbearable." So right then, something's become me or mine. And we can't always tell exactly—is it the pain? Is it the unpleasant feeling? Is it the thought, "This is going to lead me to the hospital"? Is it the aversion? Sometimes we can't tell because all that stuff happens so quickly, so altogether. But right there, you can feel that contraction, that glitch, that ball of twine of sakkāya-diṭṭhi, personality view.

So we can explore it. Just notice when it's there and when it's not. And any sense impression grasped can lead to the whole arising of the sense of self, the sense of personality, just like that. If you explore it with interest, it's really fun and funny and pathetic. And then it goes away.

So you can be walking, and a memory just comes. How many memories just come and go with this one? Some memory of embarrassment in the third grade. So a memory comes of how embarrassing some horrible thing you did in the third grade, and there's clinging to it, and that sense of shame goes over you. "Oh, God." And then right away, all the other memories that contribute to proving that that's really true—suddenly you're just doing walking meditation and you say, "I'm not even walking right, people are probably looking at me," and you know how you teeter a little bit, you lose your balance, you think, "Oh God, they're all seeing me, I can't even do walking meditation right." All of that, just from a memory that was grasped. Whole sense of self coming and going in a moment, right?

This goes on, as I'm sure you know, all day long. But if we don't look, we keep thinking it's the same sense of self, but it's not. Different ones are coming. First, there's that embarrassing one in the third grade. Then there's the one who went to lunch and ate too much, and now their stomach hurts, and you're like, "God, I'm pathetic, I can never control myself." There's that one. Then there's the one who goes and has a pretty quiet sitting and says—

Even though I was tired, I came and sat. I have a lot of virya. I have a lot of faith. It's really going well, you know. And then you remember all the times it went well. That's another one. And then there's the bored one walking out. And then there's the really calm one. And then there's the one who feels old and the one who feels young and the one who feels—it's endless. It's endless. But they're all different.

So Ajahn Buddhadasa said the self is merely a condition that arises when there's grasping or clinging in the mind. A ball of gunk in the mind—it comes and it goes. You can just look at it. Come, look at it, go. What's the big deal?

We hate it. That's one big deal. The other thing is we don't see it, and we're back like that hound dog, running after pleasant, running away from unpleasant, trying to gratify the sense of me. We're rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic, trying to have a better sense of me.

Fine. Use your meditation to have a better sense of me. That's what we do in the beginning because that's all we know. If I could get concentrated, I can feel better about myself. If I can really have some insights, I can go out of here and astonish everyone with how open and compassionate I am. I was waiting for twenty years for everyone to get astonished, but now I've given it up. It's a lot easier when you give it up. That's the freedom. I used to just really want to understand, and now I don't anymore. And that's the freedom.

The Buddha talks about agitation through clinging. Explore and see if that's true. Agitation through clinging. We're just sitting here minding our own business. A thought arises, a pleasant sensation arises, a

memory arises, a sound arises, there's a thought that's clinging to it. The whole sense of me right there. Agitation.

Ajahn Sumedho says we're constantly creating our sense of self by thinking about it all the time. And you can't create a peaceful self. Explore and see. But whatever arises dissolves. So that's why it's actually fun just exploring.

Attachment to view—see it clearly. Ah, that's releasing. Sense of self—sometimes you can see what it's about, sometimes not. Just, ah, sakkāya-diṭṭhi is like this. I do that a lot in my daily life. I can feel a sudden grip. What is it? Is it aversion? Is it clinging? What am I clinging to? Oh, sakkāya-diṭṭhi. It's like this. The personality, feeling of shame or whatever. It's like this. Not pushing it away, but just stepping into the awareness, stepping out of the constricted mind of clinging into the unrestricted mind, as the Buddha says, of non-clinging. Non-clinging even to sense of self.

It doesn't have to go away. A sense of self is like this. Clinging is like this. For just that moment, there's a taste of what the Buddha was talking about—liberation through non-clinging. Just a taste.

Luckily for us, just that little taste of the Dharma is enough to really spark the trust, the faith, to keep us looking. One of my teachers said, "A spark of truth is enough to burn up a mountain of lies." It's true. Because when we touch it, we know—oh, that really is the peace and ease that's accessible. Even when we forget it, we know we've forgotten it. We're caught in our stories and all of that. But it's always there—oh, it's like this, *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*—that potential is always present.

I just want to end with a short reading from Master Sheng Yen, who died just a couple of weeks ago. He was a really wonderful Chan master from Taiwan. I sat a couple of times with him. He was a lovely man.

He says: "One does not practice to become enlightened, but when it happens, it's like waking from a dream. True liberation does not come from wanting to be liberated. In true liberation, there's nothing to want, nothing to discard, no place to go and no place to avoid."

And this is Adyashanti: "Those who are free don't want anything. They don't want anything from their mind. They don't want anything from their emotions. They don't want anything from anyone, and they don't want anything from life. They don't want anything. If you don't want, all that's left is an incredible sense of being free. Not wanting is not the same as aversion. Not wanting is freedom."

So let's just sit quietly for a moment.

Thank you for listening.

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