Exploring the Nature of Craving with Wisdom

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:02:19

So as we know, there are really many different ways of recognizing the truth, of understanding how things are, of our minds coming to freedom. There isn't only one way. In the suttas, in the texts, there are various ways that the Buddha describes the way we suffer, what the mind that's free from suffering is like, and how to recognize what that free mind is.

Tonight I want to talk about a very basic approach, and that's simply to explore together the experience of craving—which is really one of the most fundamental things that the Buddha spoke about, making it the second noble truth, the cause of dukkha. One of his statements was that the sublime truth has been discerned by the tathagata, meaning himself: namely, liberation of heart and mind through non-clinging. This is a very powerful, very sweeping statement—that he discovered the liberation of mind, of heart, through non-clinging.

I want to explore how non-clinging is not some state that one achieves, but is rather a moment-to-moment activity of mind, because mind itself is a moment-to-moment activity. Let me define how I'm using "mind" tonight. I'm using it to mean the moment-to-moment arising of a moment of consciousness together with the mental factors that come with it. The word used in Pali is *citta*. There's a moment of consciousness arising, and together with it are all the aggregates—perception, *vedana* (feeling tones), *sankharas*, all the other mental experiences. Every moment of consciousness includes perception, *vedana*, and all the different mental factors that make it wholesome or unwholesome. There could be mindfulness, there could be wisdom, there could be *metta*, there can be craving. There can be aversion, there can be delusion, there can be equanimity—whole ones mixed together. So when I'm saying mind, I'm really referring to *citt a* and what's in it, and this is arising and changing from moment to moment—which thank goodness.

Because if it were a steady state, there would be no practice. Can you imagine if you just had the same mind state for your whole life? But that's what you're craving, isn't it? You're craving some mind state. You maybe touched one once, or you made it up—you never even had it—and you're craving it. "That's what enlightenment's going to be like, and it's going to just stay like that forever." We're so deluded.

I want to talk about craving because it's not "we" who are deluded—that's one of the effects of craving. When craving is present in the mind and we don't recognize it—which is, let's face it, a lot of the time, not all, but a lot—it colors our perception. We recognize what's happening inaccurately, we build our descriptions of ourselves and the world on that, and then we don't see the craving. We keep wanting whatever the thing is, and we just get further and further from any sense of harmony with what is, because we don't even know what is.

When the Buddha talks about discerning the heart and mind of non-clinging, he didn't say *creating* the mind of non-clinging—he said *recognizing* it. When craving and its corollary, aversion, and of course delusion (because craving doesn't arise without delusion) aren't present in a moment or in a series of moments, that's what mindfulness is helping us see. Then, when there are more steady moments of non-delusion, the potential is there as a condition for wisdom to arise. Wisdom is another mental state. And when wisdom arises, perception is accurate. When perception is accurate, when we recognize accurately, in that moment, for that moment, craving just releases—because it doesn't make any sense. It's a strategy that doesn't work.

But because we don't turn around and look at it, really recognize how it's manifesting and how it's not working and how it thinks it's working—because we don't really explore it but rather let it run the show so often—we don't see that it doesn't work. We think, "I have to somehow get rid of all this craving, and I'm so deluded and I'm so hopeless. The more I practice, the more craving I see, or aversion, just the flip side. Or delusion. I see so much more. I'm so much worse. There's no way I'll ever get rid of all this craving. It's just a mountain—ten thousand mountains of craving. It's hopeless."

But how many moments of non-craving have you had? Do they match how many moments of craving you've had?

Luckily, it doesn't work like that. It's just this close—a moment of not seeing accurately. Oh. In that moment, craving doesn't make sense.

So that's kind of the spirit I hope we can look at it in. This is really bringing wise attitude, satipañña. Ajahn Buddhadasa, the Thai monk I think I mentioned, would talk about sati, mindfulness, and pañña, wisdom. He would speak of satipañña—mindfulness-wisdom at the sense door, at the moment of perception. So there's hearing... Mindfulness and wisdom at the sense door recognizes things as they are. It recognizes sound as sound, for example.

Bringing wise attitude, this recognizing the quality in the mind in the moment that's observing—wise attitude is just interested in seeing what's happening. It's what we've been talking about the whole time. Can we bring that attitude to exploring the experience of craving, and its stronger movement into grasping or clinging when it's present, instead of hating it or missing it or loving it? Let's just see what it is, how it manifests, how it works, what's the effect in the heart, in the mind, in my actions.

And in that moment, when satipañña—mindfulness, wisdom, right attitude, a moment of mindful awareness—recognizes, "Oh, craving is like this," in that moment, craving has just become the next mental object, the next sankhara. It's not a problem. I'm just talking experientially now, not theoretically. But experientially, it's as if in those moments—"Oh, that's craving. It feels like this"—it really is an object. It's as if the awareness, the satipañña, is recognizing it, and the craving itself is not functioning then as a hindrance. It's not really coloring, and we're seeing it. So in that moment, the citta, the mind, is clear. It's pure. There might even be wisdom. "Oh, look at craving. It's like that." And it doesn't go anywhere. It's not

like, "Get out the hammer!" "Craving is like that"—that's not satipañña. That's aversion, the flip side of craving, of fear. "Oh, look at craving. Oh, look at wisdom. Oh, look at hearing. Oh, look at thinking." It's simply another arising experience to bring that quality of awareness, mindfulness, interest to it when we can. And when we can't, we notice that.

Craving, when it's seen through, when it releases like that—in a moment, I'm just talking about a moment—that releasing of craving is what's referred to as renunciation. And I think it's kind of odd in our culture when we read about craving or wanting or desire. Instead of craving right now, I'm going to say desire because that makes it more confusing. No, I'm doing it on purpose, because one of the problems a lot of people have—and I've heard questions about this here—is that "desire" is a word in English that covers a lot of different mental states. The word taṇhā for craving is very specific, and I'll get to that in a minute.

But when we think of desire, so many times people think, well, desire has an almost pleasant connotation. Desire has the promise it's going to make us happy. That's why we like it. People say, "How can I live without desire? Why would I want to?" So desire has this connection with the pleasant, with getting things we like. And that has a sense of somehow being connected with happiness.

Renunciation? Not so much. See, you're laughing. Why?

What do we think of renunciation? I'm putting this out as something for you to explore—we're not into you believing stuff. The truth is, it's actually the reverse of what we assume.

Renunciation, or *nekkhamma* in Pali, doesn't mean something dry and aversive, shutting everything out of life. Renunciation doesn't mean throwing things away with aversion. Remember, in the Eightfold Path, wise intention is the second step, where the intention of greed under wisdom naturally transforms into renunciation.

I don't even like the phrase "letting go," because letting go sounds like *I'm* letting *this* go—too much me, too much pushing. Rather, it's that the wanting just stops. It dissipates because it doesn't make sense anymore. And in its place, there's actually the peace of just being as we are in the moment, the peace of simplicity.

Renunciation as an outer form can have many different manifestations. But when I'm talking about renunciation here, I'm not talking about the outer form. I'm talking about the inner intention, the wise intention when the clinging releases. The renouncing of that clinging may or may not involve renouncing a particular object—that's not really the point. The clinging dissipates, and what we're left with is peace, actually.

You can have the outer form that looks like real renunciation and be riddled with craving. Someone asked one of my teachers, Sayadaw U Tejaniya, about becoming a monk. He did most of his practice as a householder, and he's been a monk only about fifteen years, which in Burma is unusual because most of the Sayadaws were monks since they were seven. They don't have much of a clue about what it's really

like to live a household life. But he does—he's been through a lot of stuff.

So someone was saying he became a monk because of the renunciation and the freedom from craving, being really idealistic about it. And he just cracked up laughing. He said, "You know, it's not like that. You know how many different things you crave in a lay life? There are so many different things to crave. So you become a monk and there are only two things you can crave, but you put all that same amount of craving into those two things." And definitely I've met monks and nuns who can do that. Not all, but some.

So it's kind of reversed from our society's way of looking at it. Both misconceptions—thinking of desire as leading us to happiness, and renunciation as being the way of dried up, depressing Theravada Burmese Buddhists—exist mostly because the emphasis is on the object. Without desire, I won't get nice things or states or whatever. With renunciation, I have to live without whatever it is I think is so important.

But the whole matter of craving and freedom from it has nothing whatsoever to do with objects. Craving is a quality in the mind, a mental quality. And the suffering of it is the effect it has in the mind. We're not seeing it on the basic level of how it keeps us running in samsara, wanting this, wanting that. And on the deeper level, we're missing how it colors and distorts perception. As long as we're locked in craving—even craving enlightenment, it doesn't matter what—the craving itself hides the peace that's actually available. It's so poignant.

And it doesn't matter if you're craving pizza for lunch or you're craving that incredibly blissful state you had yesterday. If you're looking at the object and not at the quality in the mind, we're missing the whole picture.

Back to a little vocabulary. I'm using the word "craving" deliberately to correspond with the Pali word *taṇhā*, which is the word the Buddha uses in the Second Noble Truth: "This is the noble truth of the origin of dukkha—usually translated as suffering—which is this craving, this *taṇhā*, which produces renewal of being, which is bound up with delight and lust and seeks and finds pleasure now here and now there." I really like that phrasing: it seeks pleasure, it finds pleasure here and there.

There are three kinds: craving for sense pleasures, which is obvious; craving for existence or being; and craving for non-existence. Briefly, craving for existence—the main way you can see it in your experience, and this is really visible on meditation retreats—is the craving, the *taṇhā*, for a better state, a different state. I see this so much in my own practice. Sense pleasures are obvious.

Craving for a better state—we just think that's practice. We just think that's true. It should be better, or it should stay. And craving for non-existence, in the simple moment-to-moment way that Sayadaw U Tejaniya talks about it, would really be aversion. It's craving for something to stop existing. That knee pain, for example—would that just stop existing?

So this word *tanha*—I'm not a Pali scholar, but they say the closest translation is more like "thirst." I like that because it gives a sense of what that quality feels like in the mind and body when it's present. We can

learn to recognize it. It's thirst. It's really like, "I've got to have this." As it strengthens into "I've got to have it," that's grasping. That's just the next step in the dependent origination. It's pleasant, but we don't notice it's pleasant. The habit of the mind is to lean into it. Yes, I want. This will make me happy. And then it strengthens into grasping, holding on, attachment, clinging. Those are all synonyms for the Pali word *upad ana*.

So when the Buddha is talking about *tanha* as being the cause of our suffering, he's talking about this quality in the mind of thirst. We'll get to exploring that in a minute.

Oftentimes people will say, "Well, what's wrong with wanting to take care of your family? What's wrong with wanting to enjoy nature on a beautiful day?" You can go through the whole list. I'm sure you've come up with things for yourself. What's wrong with wanting that? What's wrong with desire? If there was no desire, who would ever do anything? In fact, somebody said to me once on retreat, "If I didn't have desire, what would I do without it? Just sit in my room for the rest of my life?"

First, let me say there are other qualities of mind that can give rise to intention to act other than desire and fear—such as compassion, such as wisdom, such as this next word I'm going to say, which is often translated as "desire" from the Pali: *chanda*. It's a broader, different word. *Chanda* is often translated as "desire" into English, and *tanha* is also often translated as "desire." So that's really confusing.

I looked up *chanda* in the Pali-English dictionary, which is this huge book. It has two whole pages on *chand a*. It's describing a quality of mind that's ethically neutral. It's described variously as desire to do, a kind of willingness, an energy that comes up to do something, almost an excitement. And it's ethically neutral because depending on what other mental factors come together with it, it could be just kind of a neutral thing, or it can be wholesome, or it can be unwholesome.

Chanda can come up in a wholesome way. It's in one of the lists of the Buddha called the *iddhipadas*, which I'm not going to go into in detail, but they're the four bases of power for concentration. *Chanda* is listed as one of them, so it's very wholesome, and in that context it's often translated as "zeal"—this real arising of energy to do something. We would say, "Yeah, I really want to do it. I have a lot of energy."

But you can look and see the quality in your mind, in your heart, and we get to become familiar with when it's wholesome or not. When it's wholesome, there's not this sense of contraction. There's not this sense of narrowing. It's not like, "Yeah, I really want to do it, and if you're in my way, I'm just going to run over you." That's what craving does. Nothing else matters with craving. When it's wholesome, you see more of the big picture. There's some wisdom.

So *chanda* is this excitement, this desire to do, and it can be directed toward wholesome, helpful things in our life, in our regular day-to-day life, and we often call it desire. But it can also be unwholesome. The word for the first hindrance is actually sense desire, and the Pali term for that is *kama chanda—chanda*, this desire, this real wanting, this excitement about sense pleasures. So you see how it gets confusing.

And you see how we can't just look outward. That's how we get confused. But we can learn to keep getting interested. Just get interested in turning the attention into what's the quality in the mind, in the heart right now, in the mind that's aware. And we're doing it not taking it personally, not with judgment, just with interest to see how the mind works.

So when you're thinking about that, play with the difference. Just do a little thought experiment. Imagine you just want to take a walk. It's a beautiful day. Imagine it is chanda—this kind of, we won't even say zeal because that's so much, but just a real interest, enthusiasm, this energy to take a walk. And it's wholesome. There's the energy to take the walk. You're a little tight. It's a beautiful day. You're not frantic. You have the energy. You're going to take a walk. You're going to be present. And many people describe that actually in taking the walk, their mindfulness, their sense of presence got much more balanced. You could say, "I had the desire to take a walk." Fine. That's not unwholesome. That's not tanha. What's the suffering in that? There isn't any. Don't confuse it with tanha.

Tanha is when you're sitting here. It's five minutes into the sitting, and you're thinking, "I don't really like what's going on now. I want to take a walk. I really want to take a walk. I should have done it before, but I didn't. And now they were talking about walks. It's a beautiful day. It's going to get cold and rainy tomorrow. This is my last chance. I've got to take a walk. I don't care if it's the 9 a.m. sitting and all the teachers are here—I'm out of here." And you almost can't stop yourself. Maybe you don't stop yourself, and you're out taking that walk. And if you're not looking at the state in the mind, you're just looking at the walk, it carries this kind of seductive quality. "Oh, you'll be so happy if you take this walk." That's the promise of craving. "Just do me, do this thing, and you'll be so happy."

I remember reading this from Andrea Levine, where she was describing how the mind says, "Oh, just eat that second piece of chocolate cake. It'll make you so happy." And then you eat it, and the mind goes, "I wouldn't have done that if I were you." But do we pay any attention to the fickle, inconstant nature of the mind? No. The next time craving comes up, we just follow along.

Yeah, right. That's right. This will really make me happy. Because we're always looking out at the object.

So did you get a little sense of the difference between chanda and craving? Think about whatever your idea of enlightenment or the really great state of awareness would be. Can you get a sense—and don't tell me you haven't thought about it—can you get a sense of what craving for that could possibly feel like? Starting with tanha is actually easier.

Yes, it's subtle. But do you get a sense of how the craving can be there and we don't even notice it because we're so familiar with it? It has an energy that feels as though it's onward leading into the thing that we want, just like the chocolate cake or dinner or the walk. Yes, if I lean into it, I'll get it. Almost. I'm almost there. One more breath. If I just sit through two sittings like yesterday, it'll come.

Sometimes we even think we know we're striving. We say to ourselves, "I'm looking for striving. I'm not

striving." And we come out of our sitting with our shoulders about to break, and we're looking for it but we don't see it. It's so familiar.

Now, any idea we have of what awakening would be like is going to be too limited anyway. But that same sense of having a memory or an idea of something that seems wholesome and useful—there can be a chanda, a wholesome way, a zeal, a willingness that isn't the same as the narrowing, the leaning into, the grasping of craving that's trying to make it happen.

There's a sense that this is what gives us inspiration. This is what gives us the faith to do. Saddha is often translated as confidence or a willingness to do, and that's a wholesome state. So chanda can be knowing what it's like when the mind is clear and the sense of awareness is really trusted. I know that sense of when nothing's a problem. A friend of mine calls it the place of no problem, although it's not a place. I know that feeling.

Chanda can be the willingness—yes, I can't make it happen because I know it's antithetical. Wanting to make it is exactly what prevents it, what blocks it. But chanda could be just the awareness of that possibility. Not the wanting of clinging, but something that can give me the energy to come back and be here in this moment with the fact that it's not like that right now. It's like this. And being with it like this is actually the only place that purity of mind and freedom can ever be discovered, because there is nowhere else.

So that's another delusion of craving—it's always looking to the next moment to be better. And there's nothing but here.

When you find you're looking towards the object, whether it's a sense pleasure or a state, just turn around and see. We can learn to explore for ourselves the quality in the mind. It's not personal. It's just that the nature of craving is to crave. The nature of mindfulness is to be mindful. It's not like you are personally a failure because craving keeps coming up. It's the way things work when there's not awareness.

There are three movements in the unfolding process of insight—that's the way Bhikkhu Bodhi describes it. I find it helpful to look at this framework, especially in terms of craving, not just sense pleasures but all the cravings. The Buddha was brilliant, as Winnie said the other night. Amazing. He talks about gratification, the danger, and the escape. Our process of insight can consciously explore these three areas.

What I think is so brilliant is that he includes gratification. In terms of craving and in terms of how it strengthens into grasping, I'm sure you're aware he talks about four areas where we really get involved in grasping and don't recognize it. The obvious first one is sense pleasures.

The next one is views and opinions, and this is huge. Views in Pali is *diṭṭhi*. As you know, right view or wise view, *sammā diṭṭhi*, is the first step of the Eightfold Path. Wrong view, *micchā diṭṭhi*, you find frequently in the suttas—like when Guy was reading that sutta where the Buddha was saying "you misguided man." I forget exactly what it was about, but that would have been addressing wrong view.

But attachment to any view, even right view—attachment to it leads us into delusion because of the narrowing, distorting quality that attachment brings to consciousness. Beyond views in general, there's *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*, the personality view or identity view. And the third area of grasping is attachment to rites and rituals, or thinking that if I do a certain thing in a certain way, that will bring me peace. This was prevalent in the Buddha's time when, for example, many Hindu Brahmins thought that if they bathed in a particular river, that would wash away all their previous bad actions, all their previous bad karma. That kind of rite and ritual. So none of us think anything like that, do we?

The Buddha talks about this: "Before my enlightenment, while I was still a Bodhisatta, it occurred to me: What is the gratification in the world? What is the danger in the world? What is the escape from the world? Then it occurred to me: Whatever pleasure and joy there is in the world, this is the gratification in the world."

I love that, because as Guy said in his first talk, when the Buddha talked about happiness, there is happiness of sense pleasures, of being with family, even the happiness of higher states. There's gratification in all of that. Sometimes we try to jump over this and think that to let go of craving means we must be almost afraid of the pleasant. Either we love craving or we're afraid of it and we're afraid of the pleasant. But no—there's gratification, and we need to recognize that. We shouldn't pretend it's not gratification or that there's something wrong with us if we're gratified. If we get into that denial, we're just getting further and further away from seeing. We have to allow, with awareness, that there's gratification.

"That the world is impermanent, bound up with unreliability and subject to change—this is the danger in the world. And the abandoning of desire and lust for the world—this is the escape from the world."

The world, you know—he's really talking about the six sense experiences, because that's all we can ever experience. He's not saying hate everything and get away from it. He's really saying the abandoning of the desire, the craving, the *taṇhā*, for experience. And again, when we hear this we think, "But that's like pushing everything away. That's renunciation. What would life be? Some dull, gray mass of nothing?"

That's not what it is. When things are seen accurately, when the danger is seen accurately, the craving naturally releases because it doesn't make sense anymore. And what we're left with, as I said before, is peace.

There's a quotation from Nisargadatta. He says: "Do not be afraid of freedom from desire and fear. It enables you to live a life so different from all you know, so much more alive and interesting, that truly by seeming to lose all, you gain all." It's just a different kind of happiness that the craving mind can't know.

So the danger really is not that there's gratification—that's fine. The danger is that we rely on the gratification. Of course we attach to it, we don't know it's going to change. We're all aware of that; we've talked about it a lot. Even though intellectually we know it, and intellectually we also know that even though we know it we still go ahead and grasp at stuff that we know is going to change, right? Like that

mental state you had that was so pleasant earlier. Or the chocolate cake, or your relationship, or your body not hurting tonight.

The danger in the gratification is that if we're not mindful, if we're not simply aware of how the gratification functions, we really fall into it, we rely on it. In the deluded mind fed by craving, that becomes the only way we know to be happy. That's the seduction of craving, as I've said before: "Just follow me, it'll make you happy." And it distorts our perception.

Just with sense pleasures—haven't you noticed that when you really have that thirst for something, the mind's eye, the perception of it, makes it seem so much better than it ever really is? Say you have a piece of cake from three days ago stashed in your room. Already it's disgusting, right? Stashed in your room. You're craving, craving, craving. Finally you go back and eat it. Does it come up to expectations? How many fantasies have you had since you've been here about future great things that are going to happen?

They're great, aren't they? I mean, it's all going to be wonderful.

One time on retreat—I can't say I kept track of all my fantasies, that would be ridiculous—but there were a few that kept coming. And I really kept thinking, "When I go back to this situation, it's going to be like this. And it'll be so great." Or, "Oh no, no, it's going to be like *this*." And I finally realized that no matter how many fantasies I had, how many different ones, the one thing I knew was it wouldn't be like any of them. And that's true. You can never know how it's going to be. It may be better, but mostly it doesn't live up to the promise craving tells us. We just don't notice that.

The Tibetans have a great saying that craving puts feathers on the object, dresses it up, makes it look just so wonderful. You know when you have a crush on somebody—just the most fascinating person, until the crush goes away, right? "What was I thinking? That person? No, no, no. They must have done something different. They must have really changed." Perception, recognition—completely unreliable, but we totally believe our perception. So the danger is we really believe the seduction of craving.

I was having a little discussion with a very wise friend. We were talking about craving, sort of joking around. He really likes cookies, this guy. Just a couple of cookies in the afternoon. Very restrained, very balanced, but got to have two cookies in the afternoon. So we were together joking about this, and he said, "There's no suffering in this. There's a desire. I see it. I eat my cookie. It's really good. And then the desire is gone and I'm happy. Where's the suffering in that?" And that's how it works, isn't it?

I said, "Yeah, you don't have to deal with the suffering until you can't get a cookie."

And he goes, "Oh, I can always get a cookie."

That's exactly where we're caught, whatever it is. Substitute whatever for cookie—and not just sense pleasures, but states of mind, the way our life's going to be, views and opinions, all of that, how I'm going to be a better person, whatever it is.

But we don't have to get rid of the cookie either. He doesn't have to stop eating cookies. Instead, just turn around and notice when that quality of craving is in our minds. Turn around and explore it. Not to get rid of it, but to see: what's the freedom from craving? It's not that we have to get rid of all the cookies in the world—we'd probably just crave more. What's the freedom from craving? Just turn around and say, "Oh, craving's like this." Explore it. How does it feel in the body? What's the effect in the mind? Does it actually feel like a wholesome, happy state? Does it feel like a suffering state?

Look for yourself, because it doesn't matter a damn if you believe what I say. It's only when awareness sees things as they are. Like—uh-uh. The craving. We're walking along, things are very peaceful, and up into the mind it pops: "If I go down to tea a little bit early, maybe I can get the good seat."

How relaxed is the rest of your walking? You're still just walking. "No, no, I'm renouncing. I'm renouncing the seat." You may renounce the seat, but that doesn't matter if you don't turn around and look at the craving. We can renounce the seat and walk back and forth with steam coming out of our ears from craving and not notice it.

So turn around. Craving's like this—sensations in the body, constriction in the mind. That's how it is for me. You look for you. And it's just like this. And that's okay. You can be with it. Mental state, physical expression—there's nothing but mental states and physical phenomena, nāma and rūpa. That's all that's ever happening. It can be craving or it can be joy or it can be boredom. It really doesn't matter. Awareness is just noticing that. That's okay.

At some point, I promise, at some point, if you're just walking with it, the craving will dissolve—because everything does. I'm not saying it won't come back, but it will dissolve. Just keep walking after it dissolves. Not "Oh yes, I got rid of craving! I'm so great." That's a new one. But just keep noticing how it feels when it dissolves. It's like, "Ahh, now it's nice."

Now if we could just notice—why is it nice? Not "How can I capitalize on it?" But just, now it's nice. Because it's peaceful. Why is it peaceful? Because craving isn't present. It's the craving that narrows and constricts. As the Buddha said, craving and aversion are makers of measurement.

And I can actually feel how the mind—you know, that meditation this morning, that moving in the direction of just the vastness, the limitlessness, just the potential of not feeling anything to do with space or boundaries—did you notice how when wanting something comes in, there's fixation? That's the word the Tibetans use. Grasping. And we do. It's like contraction, expansion, contraction, expansion. Kind of like the movement of life, isn't it? But just notice that. Just notice how it feels. Notice how it functions when craving is in the mind.

And have you ever noticed when you want something, how it affects the way you perceive other people? Other things become obstacles in the way.

I've used this example before, but it's a good one. I was on a plane—I fly a lot—and we were just loading. I

always sit on the aisle, and it was an overnight flight. I can never sleep on overnight flights, so I'm always really wasted when I get there, and I don't like it. So I was sitting in my seat on the aisle, and the planes are always crowded these days. People were coming and coming, and it was getting pretty close to when the doors were going to close. I suddenly noticed that I was in a row with nobody else.

I went from just sitting there, la la la, to "Oh, I'm in a row with nobody else." And the craving really came—I could lie down if no one comes. That would make such a difference. And my mind just went like that. What had been—I was a little spaced out, but relatively peaceful before—then it was tight and contracted. And every new person who started walking down the aisle... "No, keep going, keep going, keep going. Thank God." Every single person.

I couldn't relax. Each person became the enemy. Oh, they went by—okay, may you be happy. Oh, no, another potential enemy. I wish I were exaggerating.

I did, though—and this is one of the joys of practicing mindfulness—I did actually notice what I was doing, what the mind was doing, and the suffering of it. Not in the sense of "Oh, you're a bad person," but rather, "This is really suffering. This is the suffering of wanting." And so I really did start actually just noticing it, noticing my contraction, and doing metta to the people who came in a real way—not the kind of bypass where I'm pretending, but genuinely shifting, changing the channel.

And I honestly don't remember whether I got to lie down or not. Probably not, because you never do. But I like it that I don't remember, because it means I really did shift the channel in that moment.

That's a good example, I think, of a very simple experience and how craving completely changes the dynamic of how we perceive experience and how we feel. It feels lousy. We overlook that. When we get what we want, we feel great, so then we think craving is a good thing.

But the escape isn't necessarily—in fact it's got nothing to do with—getting what we want. The escape is recognizing what's happening with mindfulness and wisdom at the place where it's arising in the mind right now. And often the craving just dissolves. Even if it doesn't, there's that unhooking of it being about me. Because craving is, of course, always about me. That's really the delusion that's the source of all the suffering.

And mindfulness-wisdom of craving is like this: in that moment, I've just recognized it as another arising experience, and the suffering of it being about me is gone. The narrowing is gone. It's just what it is. In that moment, there's a moment of freedom from craving—a heart and mind of non-clinging. That's the direction of escape.

But the habits are so deep. The Buddha talks about this in that sutta—I'm sure many of you are aware of it—the teaching of the two darts, where he describes how a person is hit with a dart, like an arrow, and it hurts. That's one dart, and that's just normal. But then an unawakened person gets all upset, cries, beats their breast, laments, becomes completely distraught. That's like shooting yourself with a second dart. And

that's what we're always doing—shooting ourselves with a second dart. An awakened person, they're shot with the first dart and then they just don't create anything around it.

But this part I find really interesting, as the Buddha goes on talking about the unawakened person: "Having been touched by that painful feeling, he resists and resents that painful feeling." And we do this, right? "No, this shouldn't be here." And so in a person who resists painful feeling, the underlying tendency of resistance comes to underlie the mind. It becomes a habit, a tendency.

And under the impact of that painful feeling, he then proceeds to look for, to enjoy, sensual happiness. Why does he do so? Because an untaught worldling does not know of any other escape from painful feelings except the enjoyment of sensual happiness.

That just touches me. It's so poignant. It explains a world where when something is unpleasant, we don't know any other way out except to go get something pleasant right now. And the stronger we want it, the more we're going to be completely disregarding the effects it has on us, on others. We just think, "I've got to get that pleasant thing right now to escape this painful feeling."

So in him who enjoys sensual happiness, the underlying tendency to lust for pleasant feelings comes to underlie his mind. He does not know, according to facts, the arising and ending of these feelings—pleasant, unpleasant, neutral—nor the gratification, the danger, and the escape connected with these feelings. So in him who lacks that knowledge, the underlying tendency to ignorance as to neutral feelings comes to underlie his mind. When he experiences a pleasant feeling, a painful feeling, or a neutral feeling, he feels as if fettered by it, chained by it—as though we're the victims of these feelings.

I don't know, that just really speaks to me. And I feel such sadness for the habits of so many people in the world. At the same time, I feel so immensely grateful that we all have had the possibility to see that there is actually another way—that we have a path, that we have a possibility. That the way out of the suffering, the resistance to painful feelings, isn't just to mindlessly follow craving. And that craving might be for chocolate cake or for sex or for concentration or for enlightenment or for violence or for whatever.

But following the craving is just that habit.

The willingness, the ability—which comes from wisdom and faith and energy and all the factors—you all have it, you know. Tons of it. You've been here all this time. That willingness to go, "Whoa, what's happening right now?" That willingness to say maybe the mindfulness, the wisdom, the willingness to just turn around and look at what's happening in the mind now. That the way out of this confusion isn't by rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic, but by cultivating, by allowing the quality of mind to become pure. Not to feed the craving, not to feed the aversion, but to actually feed the awareness, the mindfulness. And that's just by our willingness to turn around and meet what's happening. That's all. That's all we have to do—over and over and over and over.

The wisdom really grows by itself, which is so amazing. If you feel like you have to create the wisdom—no,

we can't. That's more wanting. Wanting gets so subtle on this level. *Bhava tanha*, craving for states, craving for wisdom and thinking, "I'm the one who should do it." No, we don't have to. It's actually a huge relief. You just notice what's happening, notice what's happening. The mind goes, "Oh, but if I do this..." Oh, that feels like craving. How does that feel? Just feel it. Notice it. Notice it in the body. Notice it in the mind. Notice the thoughts it sends up. Notice how you can't stand it. Notice how that passes. Notice how the whole thing passes. And then there's a moment of peace, of wakefulness. Then there's a moment of boredom. Then there's a new craving. But it's a new one. And it doesn't matter. It's just another arising experience we can meet with awareness.

So that's the escape, really. And in terms of what the Buddha talked about there—the gratification, danger, and escape in terms of the feelings, in terms of *vedana*—I just want to say a word about that. We've talked about it a lot, and a lot of you talk about it. I know you're aware of the pleasant, unpleasant, neutral quality. Remember, as *vedana*, as Sally talked about, it's one of the aggregates. It's a mental quality.

So when there's any sense experience—hearing, for instance—consciousness just knows hearing. The perception would be "bell." That's just the memory of what comes up. If I rang the bell, it would be "bell." But the *vedana* isn't something that the sound possesses. It's not a thing in the object. It's a felt quality in the mind. It's really an activity in the mind, almost like a subtle movement, almost of liking or disliking or neutrality. And experiencing it like that—by the time we've said or labeled "pleasant," "unpleasant," "neutral"—that's actually perception again. The perception of "that was unpleasant."

I know for myself, in the way we talk about it—"oh, that's an unpleasant sound," "this is a pleasant taste," "this is an unpleasant sensation"—it's as if it's a quality that's possessed by that object, forgetting that it's actually an activity, a very subtle activity in the mind, arising with each sense contact, with each perception. I say this because when we realize we're getting into a whole reaction based on pleasant or based on unpleasant—but let's stick with pleasant since we're talking about

tanhā. As I was saying, there's nothing wrong with the pleasant experience, but turn around and notice how much of pleasant experience that we crave—what we're really craving is that pleasant feeling.

As Ajahn Buddhadasa again says, really start to notice pleasant feeling and how—he says 95% of all the decisions you make in your life are about how to get more pleasant feeling, or are based on moving towards the pleasant feeling. And then turn around and look at that feeling, that sense in the mind itself. It's so incredibly ephemeral. It's like so nothing.

When I look at it, how can it keep creeping in that I'm basing so much—and I'm not just going on this because Buddhadasa said it—basing so much of my decisions on this? Or when I get caught in craving, the mind leaning towards... I was talking the other night about trying to practice and ever so subtly trying to just make it a little better. That's all about pleasant feeling. But when you actually get it better, don't stay in the object. Turn around and notice the pleasant feeling. It's like that. It's just gone, gone, gone, gone.

I was on this last retreat, and it was some personality thing—I don't even remember what. Feeling bad about myself, blah, blah, blah. I was just noticing the feelings in the story; I wasn't so much in the story. And then there was a shift. I said, "Oh, I feel better about myself." And then I thought, well, what's wrong with feeling better about myself? Because then came the thought, "No, you shouldn't. It's not about feeling better about yourself." So what's wrong with feeling better about myself? Nothing. It's pleasant. There's nothing wrong with feeling better about ourselves. It's not like we prove anything by being filled with self-hatred.

But then I saw the place is not to stop there. Let me explore the actual pleasant feeling of feeling better about myself. And it's like nothing. Okay, so I felt better about myself. Pleasant feeling gone. Next moment. Do I want to spend my whole life trying to rearrange my thoughts so I can feel better about myself, in pursuit of pleasant feeling? No.

I'm not saying we don't want to shift our habits of self-hatred or harming ourselves. I'm not saying that at all. I'm saying let's just not stop there. Say, okay, good enough. Keep exploring. Explore how much of pleasant feeling is running. Are we getting caught in craving? Just stop and look at what it is. Maybe you'll look at it and go, "Yeah, this is great. It's worth running my life on." Maybe you'll say, "I can't even find it. What the heck is she talking about?" But just have a look. Have a look and see.

And then see when there's just the peace of it—it can be pleasant, it can be unpleasant, it can be neutral. We all have moments like that. Again, not so much noticing the object, but notice that quality of non-reactivity, of wakeful stillness in the mind that's not to-ing and fro-ing, needing any experience to make itself okay.

Well, I just want to mention *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*. I can't go through all the four kinds of grasping, but *sakkāya-diṭṭhi* is personality view. And it's basically—well, view is really when we take any perception. A perception is just a recognition, right? Like, that's a bell. I'm talking.

You look at me, you go, "that's Carol." If your perception is distorted by wanting or greed or delusion, you might look and go, "who is that?" Or you think you see me, but it's really Sally or something like that—there was just a distortion. The perception was inaccurate. This happens all the time.

Well, what we perceive—and this is from the Buddha—what we perceive, we think about. What we think about, we get all confused with assumptions and comparisons, and this is what turns into papañca, all this whole story that we make up. And then from that story, we develop a view: "This is really how it is." We attach to that view, and from that view, we then act. Politics is a great example of that—I'm not going to go into politics, but we think my view is right and that one's wrong.

What I love to play with is to see when perception arises, what comes from the perception, and then when you see the perception is really wrong and what comes from that—it just shakes up the solidity. And I love that.

So I'll give you a simple example. When I was in Burma, at the monastery where I was staying, there's one place where there's a big Bodhi tree—the kind of tree the Buddha sat under—in a big well, and there's a path walking up to it. So I was walking up the path, and I saw a nun walking around with her hands like this. My first thought was that this was that gesture of respect they always do, toward Buddha statues and toward people. So it was a kind of reverence, and I thought she was probably just respectfully circumambulating the Bodhi tree. My first perception was that, and it was pleasant. I thought, "Oh, isn't that lovely? There's so much faith here."

And then my mind kept running. This turned into papañca. I thought, "But it's just a tree. I mean, it's not even the tree the Buddha sat on. It's just a tree. So she's walking around this tree—is faith like that really useful? How do I feel about that kind of faith?" And this whole thing unfolded, and it was getting unpleasant. "How do I even feel about this country, this culture?"

And I kept walking up. I got up to her. She was texting.

So first, I really loved it. I laughed. Then my mind goes, "What's a nun doing texting?" Then I went off into a whole other thing. And this is saṃsāra. This is what we're doing all the time. This is how we're creating—and I can't go into it anymore because time is running short—but that's how we're creating the sense of self, moment after moment after moment. Some perception comes up, a sensation in the knee, and the mind goes, "My knee is killing me." And from that, whichever way it goes, all of that is what's called sakkāya-diṭṭhi, personality view.

As Buddhadāsa said, the sense of self is merely a condition that arises when there's grasping or clinging in the mind. That's all. It arises when the clinging is present; when the clinging evaporates, so does the sense of self. It arises many, many times in a day. Because we don't look, we assume a steady state. But it's coming and going all the time.

So I'll just leave you with that, to explore.

How is it different for a Buddha? He explains in his own words—I like this a lot—with perception, the way a Buddha is different is he doesn't add anything extra.

This is the Buddha speaking:

"Thus, Bhikkhus, the Tathagata does not conceive of a visible thing as apart from sight."

There is seeing—not "me seeing that." Just seeing. That's what's happening.

"He does not conceive of an unseen. He does not conceive of a thing to be seen. He does not conceive about a seer."

And he goes through this with sounds, with all the sense doors, including the mind:

"He does not conceive of a cognizable thing as apart from cognition. He does not conceive of something

uncognized. He does not conceive of a thing worth cognizing. He does not conceive about one who cognizes."

And then he says:

"Thus, Bhikkhus, the Tathagata is suchlike in regard to all phenomena—seen, heard, sensed, and cognized."

It's just this. Nothing else. It's so simple we can't stand it. The mind wants more.

I'll end with this lovely poem I'm sure you've heard, from the Japanese nun Tōgitsu:

Tōgitsu saw that a rising arose, abided, and fell away.
She saw that knowing this arose, abided, and fell away.
Then she knew there was nothing more than this.
No ground, nothing to lean on stronger than the cane she held,
Nothing to lean on at all, and no one leaning.
And she opened the clenched fist in her mind
And let go
And fell into the midst of everything.

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