Exploring The Second Noble Truth

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:01:28

So tonight I want to talk about the second noble truth, the truth of the cause of our suffering, Samudaya. You remember last time I spoke about the first noble truth, that of dukkha, the unreliability, the unsatisfactory nature. And so then when the Buddha decided, you know, the four things he wanted to tell us, the facts of life, that if we understand will free us from unnecessary suffering—out of everything, what he picked as the cause was, as I'm sure you know, this isn't like a surprise, but I'll read it to you.

This is the noble truth of the origin of suffering. It is this craving—craving is an English translation that's usually used for the Pali word tanha, and I'll go more into wording in a minute. It is this craving which produces renewal of being, which is bound up with delight and lust and seeks pleasure now here and now there.

I love this definition because it kind of gets to the seductive quality of it. Bound up with delight, seeks pleasure now here and now there. Namely, craving for sense pleasures, craving for being, craving for existence, craving for bhava tanha, which is like states of being, and craving for what is usually translated as non-existence, but which is often described as kind of not wanting a particular experience to be happening, which could move into aversion.

So I want to talk about this tonight, this second noble truth, this quality in our experience, in our minds, our hearts of tanha, and hopefully invite us to explore in our own experience to see if it's true for yourself that actually this experience is a cause of suffering. And then I will hope to point to some ways I see that, but to invite you to explore.

Now, as with the first noble truth, the Buddha says it is to be understood. The second one is to be abandoned. And when we talk about tanha, craving, a way you can look at it is, again, not just what we call the wanting of greed, but also that craving for non-existence, kind of the pushing away of what we don't like. So both of these aspects, with delusion underneath, of course. It never comes without delusion.

I can't answer this, but just to put out: why did the Buddha pick tanha rather than delusion as the cause of our suffering, as the thing to explore? I'm not claiming I can answer that, I'm just putting that out.

And it's to be abandoned. Now, the reason I really like exploring and talking about this craving, which leads to clinging, which leads to grasping so fast it's almost not synonymous but close—because in some ways it's rather obvious on the grosser level. I mean, craving for sense pleasures, when we're really caught in wanting, craving, desiring a sense pleasure, we can notice, right? And sometimes we don't notice, which is amazing. But it's not that subtle. And if you really look, intellectually you could kind of

understand how that could be a cause of suffering.

But even that we can get really lost in. And I would say, in my experience, that's the most gross level of the way that tanha leading to clinging just seduces us into confusion and suffering. So I love exploring it in my practice, in my life, because it goes to such subtle aspects of our experience where it has the effect of leading us into confusion and suffering. I just want to point to some of those as we go along.

So it's to be abandoned. But even if intellectually we could agree, yeah, okay, I intellectually think that could be a good thing to get rid of craving—many people have come and said, okay, I'm ready now, I'm putting down craving, right? Or even just pick one thing you decided to stop craving. Did it work? You could maybe really force yourself not to go—even a sense pleasure—not to go get that thing. But just sitting down and saying, okay, I've thought about it, I heard it, it's to be abandoned, I take a vow and abandon craving—we can't do it as an act of will. So don't think if you haven't done it as an act of will, it's because you're weak.

It's because only wisdom works. Only wisdom sees and understands. Craving arises through ignorance, through not understanding, through not recognizing accurately. And it's only wisdom—this is what I keep going on about, seeing accurately. I didn't realize I say that so much until I hear Brian keep referring to what Carol says. So now I think, I guess I say that a lot. But it's okay. I mean it.

The steadiness of mindfulness leads to wisdom. When wisdom recognizes a situation accurately, craving doesn't make sense. It's not abandoned in a particular moment from an act of will, but it's the natural response of wisdom. Which is good news. But our job is to set up the conditions for wisdom to arise.

What I want to do tonight in this talk—because there are so many ways to talk about this second noble truth—one approach, which Sally will do tomorrow night, is the whole train of dependent origination, the twelve links. How in a moment you can experience the middle part of it, which is the most salient for our meditation experience. To see how from the point of contact, the feeling tone arises, and from the feeling tone—this pleasant, unpleasant, neutral—how the habit of mind can move. Just that moving of craving into pleasant and pulling away from unpleasant, and then into the whole train of becoming, birth, and death, just like that. That's a really interesting and very useful way to talk about it, and then to explore in our own experience. But since Sally's talking about that tomorrow, I don't have to.

So what I want to do tonight—it's just the way my mind works—is to offer an invitation and some pointers from my experience to turn our attention inward and explore, investigate: What is this mental, physical experience—really mostly mental with physical concomitants sometimes—that is called craving? How do we learn to recognize it as it comes, as it goes? How does it arise? How does it behave in the mindstream? What is its nature? And when we're in the grip of craving, how does it behave? And then how do we behave when we're not aware, or we can't shake loose of its grip? How does it pass away again?

There's no way wisdom is going to abandon craving if we can't even recognize when it's happening. And

when we do recognize it, a tendency—again, often—is first we decide it's a good idea to abandon. Then we see that doesn't work. Then we say, okay, I'll pay attention. And then we start to see how frequently craving, wanting, desiring, clinging arises in our experience.

Has anyone noticed? Have you noticed that the more you're paying attention, the more frequently it seems to come? Because you're practicing wrongly? No—because we're seeing what we mostly don't see.

So my invitation here is not to think of craving as something horrible, not to approach it as, "I've got to go see all the craving, and it's going to be awful, because it's bad, and the more I see is more proof of how bad I am, and it's hopeless." We don't want to see it that way.

I remember, it popped in my mind tonight, years ago I was talking to a good friend who's a meditator. It was an interview, but we're also friends, and we were just talking. She was seeing a lot of craving, a lot of wanting, and I was just kind of—I get excited by that. I don't think, "Oh, that's horrible." I get excited, because that's what we have to see. Sati, mindfulness, has to see what's happening. That's how wisdom comes. See how it behaves.

So we were talking, and I was pointing things out, and I was all excited. And then she says—with all the love in her heart, she says to me, "Well, it's like you're saying to me so lovingly, 'Dear, you're just covered with green slime.'"

That's not what I mean at all when I invite us to explore this. Freedom comes from recognizing accurately. So seeing what's going on is the beginning.

There's a place in the suttas where the Buddha talks about three levels of wisdom, three kinds. All three of these play together and intertwine, but only the third level is truly transformative—yet we need them all.

The first level is called in Pali *sutamaya paññā*, which means wisdom from that which is heard. So it's basically acquired wisdom, and this is the beginning of right view, the Buddha says. When we talk about impermanence, or I'm talking about craving, or anything we hear—we come in, and that hearing is the first access to wisdom. We may or may not know anything about it from our own experience, but we hear it.

That can be the catalyst for us moving into the second level of wisdom, which is *cintāmaya paññā*. You could call it our own natural intelligence, where maybe we're pondering—say, what I'm talking about tonight, craving.

We might be pondering, remembering times in our experience where we could see how wanting this particular thing and not getting it caused a lot of suffering, and when the wanting went away—we're just thinking, "I could see how that makes sense." We're pondering and coming deeper in, and it motivates us to keep exploring, but it's not truly transformative.

This is the level that we're all at much of the time. And it's really important and useful, because so many of

us have grown up with such a deeply conditioned habit of giving power to thought—to thought as the way to understand everything, to think our way through, to figure it out. You know what I mean? And then we keep on thinking, keep on thinking. So often we can feel like we're a little bit stuck there. We've thought it through. We see it. We really understand. You come and say, "I really understand impermanence. I do really understand." We could all give a discourse on impermanence. And then we turn around and get all upset when our good sitting changes.

Because we understand it on that intellectual level. It really makes sense. But it hasn't reached the third level, *bhāvanā mayā paññā*, which is insight wisdom—where we get it in ourselves, as I like to think of it. In terms of anything, we have what we'd call an insight. It doesn't change us forever necessarily. But you've all experienced this in different ways. You've had an insight into something. *Oh. Oh, I see.* This craving went away, and I really get it. It's peaceful, and I didn't get the thing I wanted, and I didn't need to. Here's the peace. It's right here.

The difference between hearing me say that—the first level—nodding to yourself, "Yeah, that makes sense"—the second level—and actually experiencing that below the level of thought... it's like, *wow*. An aha moment. A shift of perception, really, is what insight is. We recognize in a different way.

So these three levels are bouncing around, working together. It's only steady awareness that allows this third level, this shift of perception, to arise. And we keep on paying attention, and then we understand more what that shift of perception was bringing to us.

Now I want to talk about this word *taṇhā*. The literal, the closest translation I've heard of this word—and I'm not a Pali scholar—is actually "thirst." So when I talk about *taṇhā*, I'm referring to a quality, a mental factor really, a quality in the mind-heart that arises and passes like everything else.

This quality of thirst is, I find, really helpful to understand as a leaning into or leaning away—this *need*, this thirst for something. And when it strengthens, when we kind of grab hold of something, it intensifies from craving, from the leaning in, the thirst, to clinging, to grasping. It's the same thing, just a little more gripping.

Now, in English, the word "craving" is often used interchangeably with the word "desire." And this can get very confusing. This is only in English. I've been mulling about languages, because when Brian was talking in his talk a couple of times ago about views—and how we don't even know what our particular perceptual influences have been from our whole upbringing, influences that inform the perceptions we have that lead to views—I think the language we grow up speaking and thinking in is really an interesting part of how that happens.

For English, there are certain constructions and ways of talking about things. "Desire" is one word that is very confusing, where Pali has a very specific word—*taṇhā*—for this thirst, and a different word, *chanda*, for a different kind of thing. Both of those, in English, we call "desire." But being a native English speaker, I

have no clue how these words fall and what the habits of mind and thinking are for the many other native languages represented here. I can never know what it's like to be a native Spanish speaker or Hindi speaker, or French or Swedish or Finnish or Persian, or various forms of Chinese. There are so many different languages represented here. And for each of them, there's a whole different way you think in that language. It's really interesting. No wonder our perceptions are all different, and that's going to inform the view and how we understand.

That's a little aside. But just to say, when I'm talking about words, of course I'm coming from English.

And it may or may not quite correlate with the language that's natural for you. There's no way I can do it other than in English, but I just want to acknowledge that.

So, we use the word "desire," which is too broad for this state of taṇhā. And then, many times, people get into confusion. They come and say, "Well, what's wrong with desire to take care of your family? How can you say that's the cause of suffering?" And then we get all kind of reactive, really confused. "What's wrong with desire? I'm hungry and I have a desire to go eat. That's just normal life. How can you say that's the source of suffering?"

So there's two things going on. One is the word taṇhā, thirst, which is this yearning, this needing that takes us out of being able to recognize accurately in the present moment. The second is that when we talk about taṇhā as the source of suffering, it's about the quality of that state itself in that moment in the mind—it's not about the object that the taṇhā is leaning into.

This is a pet peeve of mine. Other teachers may say something different—just honesty in advertising. Sometimes I hear people talk about wholesome desire and unwholesome desire, and I find that so incredibly confusing. Because what that's doing is focusing our attention onto the object. So you could say desire for nibbāna is a wholesome desire, and we're focusing the attention on the object, nibbāna. But taṇhā is a state of heart or mind arising in the moment that then focuses the attention onto whatever the object is in a way that's moving out of balanced, open, present in this moment.

You can feel it, that subtle pulling forward or pulling back if it's aversion. "Ah! Only if I got to nibbāna, everything would be okay." So nibbāna, which is certainly a wholesome object—whatever we know about it, it's a wholesome object—it could be an aspiration that's motivating us to land here in this moment, or it could be the source of incredible suffering because we're lost in taṇhā about it.

Have you ever experienced that? What's wrong with nibbāna? But you're ready to just tie yourself up in knots. "I came here for nibbāna, and I'm just sitting here feeling knee pain." That's taṇhā, expectation, frustration. It's suffering. Not too hard to spot, but we get lost in it.

So it's not about the object. It's about the quality in the mind of this thirst, this leaning in.

There's another word in the Pali language: chanda, which is also variously translated, but it is ethically

neutral. It's translated as a kind of excitement, a desire to do, the energy to do something. And it is ethically neutral, meaning that whether it's wholesome or unwholesome depends on what other mind states come with it.

So for instance, the sense of, "I really have the energy, I need to go get a better job because I'm about to have a child and I want to really be able to take care of my family." Now, that's a complicated thing, so a lot of different emotions could come in at different times. But the sense of, "Yes, I want to care for my family" could be compassion and chanda, this desire to do. That's different from craving. It's different from the source of suffering. Do you get a sense of that?

But chanda can also—the actual word for the hindrance of sense desire, not all desire, but that's often translated "sense desire"—the word in Pali is actually kāma-chanda. It's like excitement about the pleasures of the senses. And so in that way, it's not such a wholesome feeling because it's leading us into suffering. Not good-bad, but leading us into suffering.

So the word we translate as "desire" in English could often be used as chanda in Pali. It's also one of the four bases of success in terms of meditation qualities, sometimes translated as "zeal"—this energy that gives us real energy to practice. Chanda, willingness to do, a really wholesome thing.

So do you get a sense of what I'm meaning about when we want to explore taṇhā? Don't let yourself get all lost in what is the object. Because that's one of the ways that taṇhā, this craving, actually leads our mind into delusion, confusion that keeps us from recognizing what's happening accurately. This zoning into the object desired and not noticing what's going on here in the mind and heart.

What I'm really doing tonight is trying to bring us into an interest in exploring how this actually works.

I want to use as a framework something the Buddha talked about. Bhikkhu Bodhi, the translator, describes it as the three movements in the unfolding process of insight. This is something the Buddha discussed: noticing the gratification, the danger, and the escape in particular areas of experience. I'd like to use this as a framework for exploring craving.

The Buddha spoke about how, before he was enlightened, he was pondering: What is the gratification in the world? What is the danger in the world? And what is the escape? It occurred to him that whatever pleasure and joy there is in the world—this is the gratification.

And I love that. He's not saying, as I mentioned in my last talk, that everything is horrible, hate it all, and then you'll be happy. He's saying there is gratification, pleasure, and joy in the world. The danger is that it's impermanent, mixed up with unreliability and subject to change—this is the danger. And the escape is the abandoning of desire and lust for the world.

The Buddha said: If there were no gratification in the world, beings would not become enamored, would not become enthralled, really stuck to things in the world. But because there is gratification, we become

enamored. If there were no danger in the world, beings would not become disillusioned; beings would not suffer. If there were no escape from this, then beings could not escape from this disillusionment. But there is.

I want to use those three as a light reference point.

In talking about desire or craving that leads to clinging, the Buddha talked about four areas of grasping. I'm not going to go through them all, but the first one is sense pleasures, which is, as I said, everywhere, very seductive, but in some ways the most obvious. Then there's grasping at views, which Brian talked about quite clearly. There's grasping at rites and rituals, misunderstanding them as a way of purifying people—for instance, at his time in India, there was a belief among the Brahmins that if you went to certain rivers and washed yourself, it would wash away all your previous bad actions and all your bad karma. Which would be great. But he's saying, yeah, not so much. And the fourth is grasping at sense of self. So you can see they get increasingly more subtle.

I'll start using sense pleasures as an example and talk a little bit about sense of self.

In terms of the gratification, I think it's important to be able to recognize the gratification—the joy, the delight in sense pleasures—because that's true. Sometimes people think, well, because craving leads to suffering and sense pleasures lead to craving, I should actually not even notice the pleasant or move towards the pleasant. There are certainly plenty of suttas where the Buddha talked about the dangers of sense pleasures in very graphic terms. I'm not going to go there tonight because I really want to talk more about how the craving itself distorts our perception and leads us into confusion.

But start by seeing that sense pleasures are pleasure. Great. Pleasant sights, smells, tastes, touches, and all of that. So that's not so hard to see.

The danger is the obvious one the Buddha talked about: that whatever the sense pleasure is, it's going to change, and you're left falling flat. But another way to understand the danger—and this is something we can experience over and over if we keep remembering to notice the craving—is the addictive quality of going to sense pleasures for gratification. Because we have access often to so many, when one falls flat, we don't notice that we move into the next one, right? And the next one.

And that's exactly samsara. This round of birth and death of self and suffering. Okay, that one didn't work out—what about this next? That good sitting went away, but now I can go walk. Have you ever seen that? You're sitting and it's difficult. Okay, forget that sitting. I'm going to walk. It's going to be so good. You go walking and it's just as difficult.

Okay, forget this walking. I'm gonna go sit. It's gonna be so nice. That's it. I'm gonna go eat. Then I'm gonna feel good. Well, no, but now I'll go have a nap. That'll do it.

And we don't quite notice the process. We're just going from one thing to the next to the next. There's a

seductive quality to it—a seductive quality to the craving itself. The definition I read, you know: "accompanied by delight, seeking pleasure now here, now there." And so there's almost a way at times that the very wanting itself becomes associated in our minds with gratification.

If you really turn around and look at the experience of wanting, well, in my experience, it really isn't so pleasant. It isn't gratifying. But we don't turn around and look at it. We just keep leaning into the next thing. And so in our minds, the wanting becomes associated with getting the thing we want. It's like the only way an untaught worldling, as the Buddha says, knows to get away from the unpleasant. Remember, I used that sutta the other night: the only escape an untaught person knows from unpleasant experience is to lust after sense pleasure. This becomes what we think is the escape, but it's really the danger. This way we just keep getting pulled by the nose from one thing to the next to the next, and we don't even notice. And then when we do notice, we go, "Oh, but that's okay. I'm in charge of it all. And it's not that unpleasant."

This is my favorite little story that to me exemplifies samsara—when we don't really want to look at the suffering of it. And we can do this a lot. A good friend of mine, a dear friend, very wise person, has the habit of really liking particular cookies. Just in a very restrained way: two cookies after lunch, two cookies before bed, certain cookies, very restrained. So we were hanging out one day, and we were talking about craving, dependent origination, and such. I was saying, "But this is exactly it, you know? Craving. There's the craving, this discontent, this leaning in, having the cookie."

The person said, "No, there's no suffering in this."

I said, "What do you mean?"

He said, "No."

I said, "Well, wait—when you don't get the cookie, then what?"

He goes, "I always get the cookie."

And that's really what we think. A lot of times in our life, we just substitute something. I didn't get that cookie, but I get something else. And so we never stop and look at the process. We keep looking in the wrong direction. It keeps us looking to the gratification instead of turning around. We're always looking for the cookie instead of turning around. You say, "But as long as I can get a cookie, what's the problem?"

This is what keeps us bound to samsara: the unwillingness to turn around and look at this craving for sense pleasure. Sometimes people are almost like—I mean, I've had people say, no one here I don't think, but say almost like they don't want to look that carefully. Just feeling how that craving feels, that leaning into the cookie, because there's almost a fear: "But then I won't really enjoy the cookie anymore."

Have you had that sense? If I really look... You know, if I'm out in nature and it's so beautiful—the nature and the buds and the magnolia tree—and oh, I'm so wonderful and I feel so great. I don't want to look at

the craving. I want to feel like I'm incredibly one with nature. It's so happy. And I don't want to just go: seeing, seeing, seeing, seeing. Pleasant, pleasant. So we don't want to look because we're actually—first of all, that's not how it goes—but we're attached to

It's really so poignant to me that we're conflating, mixing up this craving with the gratification. The thing that we're looking to for our happiness and ease is the very thing that keeps us spinning in wanting, in a sense of insufficiency and not being enough. Because what is wanting? It's looking to something else to fill us up. And as long as we're buying into that, we're always going to be experiencing in that moment a sense of being incomplete. The cookie's going to do it, but not for long. So then we have to crank up another one, crank up another one. Go out and look at that bud again. Well, the bud doesn't do it today, so maybe I can find a lizard and maybe the lizard will do it. I wish the frogs would start croaking again, but it's not as nice as last night.

Not being lost in the wanting doesn't mean there's no appreciation. We still appreciate the beauty of nature. We can still appreciate a meal, but we're not looking to that meal to do more than be what that meal can be, which is pretty limited, no matter how good it is.

This is Thich Nhat Hanh: "We need to distinguish between indulging in sense pleasures"—what he's calling indulging, I'm calling just being lost in the tanha, the craving, not seeing it—"and the joy and happiness that we experience when we are mindful and at peace. This attachment to sense pleasures, or just one sense pleasure, the cookie, brings about suffering and entanglement." Look to that. It brings about complication, entanglement, both in the present moment and the future, for ourselves and others. "But the joy and happiness of a peaceful mind brings neither suffering nor attachment in the present or in the future, for ourselves or for others."

So that's something you might explore if you're outside and you're thinking, "Well, this beautiful sunset—oh, but what if that's tanha? I can't tell if it's craving or not. Should I look at it?" How does tanha feel? "I don't know. How can I tell?" Okay, right then, that's doubt. Just notice that.

But when Sally talked about papañca, papañca in the mind, I like to talk about papañca of action. And craving will really lead you—this is where you see the complication. You're just appreciating the sunset. It's lovely. It's gone. No craving. Fine. If you find you're planning your whole day to get out there for the sunset the next day, there's a little bit of craving going on. Everything starts to get complicated because we somehow have to set it up to get that thing again. Not bad, just noticing the complication that comes in. So this is part of the danger, the danger of craving.

Another danger—and I'll stay with sense pleasures and then move into some of the others. The Buddha described greed, hatred, and delusion as makers of measurement in our mind, in our heart. In other words, when there's this craving in our mind, in our heart, not recognized, when we're being led by the nose by it, it puts limitations on the range and depth of the mind, of the heart. Basically, it narrows our experience. Have you ever noticed that? When you really are into wanting something, have you noticed

how everything else becomes irrelevant? The breath, the feel, the limitless nature of mind and heart suddenly becomes all about the cookie, or whatever it is. And everything else is either in the way or irrelevant. That then affects how we actually perceive experience and how we respond to experience.

Sayadaw U Pandita was a quite profound meditation teacher, a Burmese teacher now in his nineties. Very tough teacher. He talked about—and I really like this—he said, under the influence of tanha, when it's happening in our mind and heart and we're not recognizing it, turning around and recognizing it, the way the delusion manifests is, one, we don't accurately recognize what is here, and two, we actually perceive what is not here. So we're doubly disconnected at times under the influence of tanha. And this can be rather subtle.

I'll just give a simple example, but you can explore it for yourself and see how it works. I've used this example quite a lot because it's simple yet accessible.

When I was teaching in Yucca Valley years ago, there was this lovely desert that you could walk out into, and every morning I loved to walk out into that desert. You just walk out and it's desert—some trees, yucca trees, various animals, not too many. Some birds, a little jackrabbit sometimes, once in a while a snake, and once in a great, great while, a large land tortoise.

So I was walking one day, just very present, the way you'll be here, simply with the isness of things. When there's not *tañhā*, when there's not wanting in the mind, it's just present. Kind of like big mind—whatever's occurring is occurring. There's no to-ing and fro-ing, no problem.

And suddenly the thought came in—which in itself wasn't a problem—"Maybe I'll see a tortoise today." The thought came and didn't go. This is how the whole sense of self and everything gets created. Some experience comes and *tañhā* leans into it, then grasping just grabs it and makes it a solid thing. So that thought became, "Maybe I'll see a tortoise," and the wanting came up, just like the wanting for the cookie. Not noticing the wanting, what had been just vast and present and simple and easy became really narrowed down, and I was just looking for that particular experience, looking for tortoise.

Walking through the desert—boom. Then I noticed I was going, "Not tortoise, not tortoise, not tortoise," looking, looking, looking. That was really my experience. And it actually wasn't a very pleasant walk anymore. It was just, "No, no, I want this. That isn't it, that isn't it, that isn't it." I never saw one.

Luckily, at some point I noticed it, which is good, because then I could use it for a dharma talk. But truly, I noticed it. And this is what I want to invite us to do: notice what's occurring then. Not jump onto, "Oh, I'm so bad, I shouldn't be wanting." Just notice what's occurring.

You can really feel for yourself—mentally, because craving is a mental thing—how it comes up in your body and in your mind, how you experience it. We want to learn to recognize it, to know it's present. This is great—this is mindfulness coming in. For me now, I'm so familiar with it. Sometimes you don't recognize it, but I can just feel it. It's a kind of physical contraction, almost like mentally leaning forward.

Sometimes you're just pulled. So I could notice that.

Notice the limitation, the narrowing of attention and the narrowing of the mind and heart, focused just on wanting this thing. And notice the sense of rejection or disinterest in anything else. Just to see that.

And then when we notice wanting—not hating it, not judging ourselves—but just exploring it. If it's some little thing where you don't actually need to do much, here on retreat is a great time to do it. Just stick with the wanting, the *taṅhā*, the craving. Notice how it feels. Notice what kind of thoughts come up. Notice what behaviors arise.

If it's so strong you can't not act on it, as Sayadaw U Tejaniya says, okay, wanting's just doing its job, but you bring awareness along with it and let awareness do its job. So you notice how the wanting is working, how it's driving us. It's really fascinating.

And at some point—I promise, I don't know at what point—it's going to drop away, because everything that comes together from construction dissolves again. Absolutely everything. If you can hang with it and actually watch as it dissolves, and then keep on being present, you may notice the quality of ease, the quality of peace that we usually associate with getting what we want. But it's actually because the wanting itself has dissolved. We don't have to be driven by getting that thing.

When we really learn to understand this, wanting is simply another experience—mental, physical experience that comes a lot, and goes. As often as it comes, it goes. It's not like it's going to come one more time than it goes and never leave again. Every time it comes, it's going to go. And we can really get to explore it so it doesn't become something to be afraid of or hate, but we can really understand how it works—the seduction of it for us, the gratification, and the dangers of it for us.

And this is just with sense desire, which is the most obvious one, but you see how really quite subtle it can get. The way it causes you not to see what's around—like I'm in the desert looking for tortoise and just oblivious to everything else.

We do that. You want to get to the meal on time, and you're ready to walk over people—even your best friend. "Get out of here! There's only one more corn muffin." And then you sit down and think, "May all beings be happy, may all beings be happy."

So our job is just to notice these things, these subtle movements that come up in the mind with wanting and not getting what we want. But craving can also distort perception. In a simple way, say I'm looking for a tortoise and I see a rock in the distance. The mind goes, "Oh, tortoise!" And I go running over—oh, it's a rock. There's a Tibetan saying that craving puts feathers on the object, makes it look really much more attractive. I give all kinds of examples of that. But just noticing it—really interesting.

So we can't really see what's here. Both of these ways of not seeing accurately—this narrowing of the mind and heart, not recognizing what is here, seeing what isn't here—this is also the way the dangers manifest

in craving's attachment to views. We're all going to have views; Brian talked about that, so I don't have to go into it. But the attachment to views, that "this alone is true"—the craving for it. And the sense of self, which in some ways is the most subtle and most pervasive view, comes and goes, comes and goes. Brian talked a lot about it. I only want to mention the way we can use exploring our internal experience of this thirst, this craving, this grasping, to explore how the sense of self arises and passes in a moment.

Ajahn Buddhadasa, whom we've mentioned quite a few times—a great Thai meditation and forest monk master—has a wonderful line. He said the sense of self is simply a condition that arises when there is grasping and clinging in the mind. Not some big solid thing we've got to chip away at and try to understand. For me, this is helpful because I'm kind of kinesthetic, practical. Not through ideas trying to understand and through that idea then let go of that idea—that's the way some people process and learn. We're all different in the way we take in information and learn. For me, it's very practical, moment-to-moment. And so Buddhadasa's way of describing it really works: the sense of self is simply a condition that arises when there's grasping and clinging in the mind. Or what's called sakkāya-diṭṭhi, identity view.

What we can simply notice, as we get more and more familiar with how craving, taṇhā, feels when it comes up in our mind-body—sometimes I couldn't say exactly what, but I can kind of tell it's hanging around. As you get more familiar with it, then you'll see the way it's described in terms of sense of self. Anything that arises in our experience, any of the six sense doors—a sight, a smell, a sound, a taste, body sensation, a thought or emotion, the five aggregates that Brian talked about, another way of talking about the same thing—you'll see how there are times you're sitting or walking and sounds are coming and going, or someone was describing today how thoughts were just coming and going like wisps, no problem.

But suddenly a thought comes and it's like, yes, everything in the mind and heart comes together, collects around that, and grabs a hold of it. This is how it is. Whether it's "my back hurts," or "I want a cookie," or "that sound is not acceptable"—whatever it is, something in the constantly changing experience, this movement of leaning in, taṇhā, grasping, has grabbed a hold of that experience and made it me or mine. The sense of me arises very strongly with that. Me and my back pain. Me and my cookie. Me and the sunset. You get a sense of what I'm saying?

And then it's often a thought. When we don't notice it, of course it leads to a whole series of thoughts. Usually we wake up in the midst of that series of thoughts, and it's become that particular me. The me—and I know Brian gave a lot of different examples, the different stories of me. The me who's very clumsy. The me who's an incredible yogi. The me who went through all those things in third grade. The me who really feels out of it today. All of those different ones.

But because we don't stop and explore, we don't stop and look at it—as Brian said in his talk, you know, the me in third grade is the same me that's sitting here, right? Doesn't it feel like that?

Because we don't really just stop and notice that sense of self arising. It's just another experience that

comes and goes. It's the same as being able to explore *taṇhā*. The sense of self really is just a lot of thoughts that begin from a moment of *taṇhā*, a moment of craving connected with any particular thing. It can be anything, any stupid thing. The particular chair you want to sit in in the dining room—craving for that can be the source of a huge story of self.

Someone else is in your chair. *Your* chair. What are they doing there? I've been sitting there every meal this whole retreat, and now they're there. Don't think I'm making this up—no one on this retreat has told me this, but I've been on a lot of retreats at IMS. Believe me, this is not something I'm completely inventing.

And people will tell you, mostly after it's over and they've really seen it, because in the midst of it, we don't recognize this as craving and sense of self. We think that person is out to get me, sitting in my chair. The whole sense of offense, of being wronged.

But what we can do is start to feel that craving. So you walk into the dining room, you see that—it's a sight. The perception is just seeing. Then the whole story of me comes up around that. The suffering one, the craving. And then whatever goes on—you turn, you walk out—that whole thing falls away. That me, that's birth and death of sense of self around craving. Another sense of self will arise, no doubt, quickly. But that's okay. We can just, with our awareness, with our interest, explore how this happens.

And this is one of the really subtle ways that this movement of *taṇhā*, this movement of craving, is the cause of so much confusion and suffering. It's at the heart, the seed, of the moment-after-moment-after-moment creation of story of self. Unseen, it is the source of suffering.

I'm not saying, actually, that the stories creating sense of self need to be a problem. I'm not saying that. They're thoughts driven by craving, and when awareness recognizes that's what's happening and sees through it, we don't have to get rid of it. It's just another arising mental and emotional construction that comes and goes like every other mental construction. It doesn't need to be a problem. But we can really get interested in seeing how the craving comes up in relation to anything—a sense experience, a view, a memory—and then off to the races, as someone said. Or not.

And instead of judging it, just explore and see. Bring the steady awareness to see. Whatever arises, dissolves. The craving arises and dissolves. The sense of self arises and dissolves.

So the escape—I'm talking about gratification, danger, and escape—I want to talk about again in our moment-to-moment experience here, in a simple way that we can practice. So I'm not at the moment talking about the big escape forever, but just in a moment of seeing.

The escape is this ability, this steadiness of awareness. Awareness itself does not uproot clinging, does not uproot craving. But awareness—the steady awareness that allows us to see this whole chain of cause and effect, like I've just been describing with sense of self or with wanting a cookie or whatever—to see it all, to see the craving come and go, the steady awareness is what sets the conditions for the wisdom to come

in.

So after seventy-five times of walking into the dining room and that whole sense of self around the person sitting in my seat, finally wisdom comes in and says, "Why don't I sit over there?" So easy. The craving was abandoned by wisdom. With an act of will you could say, "I'm just not going to do it. I'm going to sit over there. I'm sitting over here. I'm not craving." It's not the same. "Why don't I just sit over there?" And the craving is abandoned. That's from wisdom.

But what we can do is set up the conditions by really taking our refuge in the steady awareness, by getting interested in this process rather than judging or fearing it.

So I'm going to give a really, such an insignificant example that you're going to wonder why I'm picking it—but that's exactly why I'm picking this example, because this is what we can do so often on retreat to really see. Because it's the same, it works in the same way with the big things. So one day, I wasn't on retreat but I was teaching.

I got up in the morning and had a mystery novel sitting next to the bed. I get up in the morning, I'm getting dressed, whatever, and just this strong craving came up. "Oh, let me just pick that up and read a little bit." Which—so what? I mean, this is hardly a horrible thing to pick up and read.

So I was watching, just watching, except doing it. And I said, "No, I'm not going to do it. I'm just going to watch the craving." And as I say, this is so trivial because people would say, "So what if you pick it up and read? Who cares?" Nobody cares. There's nothing wrong. Again, it's not about focusing on the object. The interest is in looking at what's going on. It's easier to look at the craving when the object isn't very important to you. It's easier—so pick the little things. Start with the little things.

So I said, "Okay, I'm not going to pick it up. But I'm going to sit here and really be aware of the wanting and the thoughts that come up in my mind about it." So I sat there for a few minutes. I didn't just say, "Oh, forget it," and go brush my teeth. I sat there and just watched the whole process, noticing the wanting and the thoughts and what I should do—"Oh, it's okay"—all of that. No big deal.

And then the craving just went away. Completely went away. And I could just sit there and see it completely go away. And then don't just get up and run. Feel what I was saying—the absence of craving. How that limitation, that narrowing of the depth, the breadth of mind and heart, is gone and it's just... peace. Just like that. It's such a little thing. We can do this hundreds of times a day. And it gets really interesting.

In that little moment, that wasn't a big "Aha! Now I'm liberated, the mind is forever free from clinging." But it was a moment where the heart-mind was free from clinging. And that moment comes and goes, but in that moment we get the intimation—a little beginning glimpse into what was the Buddha talking about when he says, "What does one know?" I think Greg said this, that one enlightened knows that nothing whatsoever is worth clinging to, worth holding to. It's not a put-down of things. It's saying that this

relationship of grasping onto something to make the whole complete for gratification is the source of our suffering.

By not seeing it, by continuing to give all the energy and focus to the object—ours to the object—that process continues to strengthen the sense of self and other, of separation. We don't see the emptiness of self-existence in any object.

This is just the last thing I want to point to—the way, an even more subtle way I think, that craving really distorts perception and keeps our suffering going. In a moment of craving, it keeps us zoning in, moving into whatever the object is, whether it's a cookie or a particular chair or a mood or a memory or a way I want to think about myself. As soon as there's that craving, it's like the mind—and this can be very subtle, we're not talking huge—this is very subtle, where the attention fixates on the object.

Now, you can be really focused, focus attention really on one object. That doesn't mean it's craving—don't get me wrong. We can be very relaxed, sinking into just the breath. The mind is not craving. Learn to recognize that contraction of craving. We can be really concentrated on one thing; that doesn't mean it's craving. But the craving is just a kind of zoning into the object: "Oh yeah, there's that, there's that."

So we can also be with the breath, be with the breath, be with the breath—and what's really getting strong in that, which we don't notice, is the sense of *me* wanting *object*. You see what I mean?

And so the sense of me gets strong, the sense of object gets strong. This is another thing with language—with English anyway. We say, "I see the bowl." Just the way the English language works, there's always me separate from the object. So that just tends to be the habit of our mind. And craving, even so subtle, perpetuates that.

That's really all I wanted to say about this. Don't go all crazy about it, but just notice how craving tends to isolate things out and keep us in that sense of separateness, of isolation.

The escape? Simply the willingness to be steady with the awareness. Not trying to make the experience be what we think, but just that willingness to be steady with awareness.

I'll end with a couple of quotations. This is from Ajahn Chah:

Worldly accomplishments on whatever level still leave you in this realm of suffering. Whatever happiness there may be comes about in dependence on external things. It's not the happiness of freedom, the happiness that does not depend on anything external. What is it we depend on?

And by depending, he means craving.

We depend on possessions, on pleasure, on reputation, on praise, on wealth. We lean on all these things like leaning on a rotting old tree trunk. After we lean on it for too long, it breaks and falls and we fall with it. Such is worldly happiness.

This is from 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, what's left is an incredible sense of being free.

So let's just sit for a moment.

Thank you for listening.

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