Investigating Craving and its Ending in our Experience

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 55:31

In a way, what I want to talk about tonight could be seen as a follow-up on the question about purification—purification of heart-mind.

As Dara said, it's not exactly something we do, but essentially it's transforming the habits of the habitual mental states that arise in the citta, the mind-heart. I think I explained before that the word citta in Pali means both mind and heart. It doesn't have the split we give it in our language. We're transforming the habits that obscure the clear and accurate recognition of reality—yata-bhuta, things as they have come to be in this moment—the habits that obscure it: greed, hatred, confusion, and that lead us into all kinds of unnecessary suffering, both internally and in our speech and actions.

Essentially, this is at the heart of the Four Noble Truths, the essential primary teaching, said to be the teaching of all the Buddhas—certainly this Buddha that we have some teachings from. What I essentially want to talk about tonight is the second Noble Truth, the cause of the unsatisfactory as the Buddha explains it, which is the Pali word tanha.

Now, I know we haven't gone through the Four Noble Truths. We will. I'm just going to mention them briefly. The first, of course, is to be understood that there is dukkha, unsatisfactoriness, unreliability in life—both the aspect of pain, obvious suffering, sickness, death, and all of that. The fact that these happen, and waking up doesn't stop them from happening. There's the unreliability of constant change. There's nothing to hold on to, and there's no inherent self-existence. That's dukkha, the first noble truth. Unsatisfactoriness is the word I like.

The Buddha then says that the cause, the origin, is this tanha. That's what I want to talk about tonight. The third noble truth is that there is a cessation, an ending of dukkha with the ending of tanha, of clinging, of craving. And the fourth is the Noble Eightfold Path—the path of life, of practice, for understanding, waking up, exploring this, what we're all doing now.

Regarding the second truth, I want to read from the Sutta. I use dukkha because suffering, I think, is too narrow a translation. It leads us to think that all unpleasantness is going to go away when we understand tanha, and it isn't. So I'll use dukkha as unreliable.

"This is the noble truth of the origin of dukkha. It is this craving, this tanha, which produces repeated renewal of being, which is bound up with delight and lust, and which seeks pleasure now here and now

there. Namely, craving for sense pleasures, craving for being, craving for states, craving for existence—that's the second one—and craving for non-existence." Vibhava-tanha is also like craving, the wanting stuff to go away that we don't like.

I want to talk about exploring this, but tanha isn't only greed. It really encompasses all of it—the craving, the thirst. The best translation, the closest translation for tanha is thirst. This thirst for pleasure, this thirst for being, this thirst for something to not be. It encompasses all the kilesas, all the confusion.

Tanha does not vanish; we do not abandon it through an act of will—which we probably know, but we keep trying. "Okay, I get it. You talk about it tonight, you read about it, I get it. She finally convinced me, it's no good, so I'm giving it up. It's not the path of happiness." If only, right? It's not abandoned by an act of will. Conversely, it doesn't mean you're a sad specimen of a human being because you haven't yet given up tanha, and you would if you had any strength at all. That's not really how it works.

But wisdom, paññā, recognizing accurately, and the stability through steady mindfulness and samadhi, stability of mind—this is the condition for clear seeing. And the clear seeing, the wisdom, is what allows paññā, what allows tanha to, in a moment, evaporate. Not because wisdom hates it—hating is really an aspect of tanha. It's because when we recognize accurately, in that moment—and there's only moments—craving doesn't make any sense. So it's abandoned.

There's a word, one talked about in the whole train up to liberation, called nibbida, which is often translated as disenchantment.

That's really what it is. The wisdom sees through the craving. There's a disenchantment with what's craved, and it drops away.

The example that's often given for disenchantment is this: if you have a hungry dog, a wild dog that comes running up and finds this big bone, he grabs a hold of it. But that bone has been out in the desert being bleached for a hundred years. There is not one speck of anything that could give that dog anything—no marrow, no nothing. Just a dried up old bone. So the dog starts on it, but immediately it's apparent there's nothing there. As much as the dog wants some pleasure, there's nothing there; that bone can't give it. You see, "Oh, that's just how it is." You don't keep wanting the bone. Wanting makes no sense. You put it down and walk away.

That's nibbida. That's disenchantment. That's, in a moment, the freedom from tanha, the freedom from the dukkha, the unreliability.

A lot of people aren't really very interested in disenchantment. And therein lies the problem. That wasn't casually said—it's actually quite deep in us.

My intention with this talk, of course, is to give a lot of information, but really my intention is an invitation to all of us to actually turn to mindfulness wisdom, to actually explore this aspect of experience

that we call tanha—as it arises, how it acts, how it passes. Because it's simply a mental state that arises and passes in a particular moment of citta, many, many moments of citta. When we're meeting it with right attitude, with just the attitude of this interested mindfulness, it's as worthy an object of mindfulness wisdom as anything else. So really that's my invitation here, and everything I'm talking about is to just let us turn the mindfulness onto the tanha, to explore it, see what it actually is so that it loses its mystique, quits driving the bus. We can actually see what's going on. What is its nature? How does it arise? How does it behave? And then how do we behave when we're not recognizing that tanha is in the forefront of the mind at the moment?

What we call mind—moments of consciousness with mental qualities arising and passing—is not a steady state at all. It's an activity. Every moment is a new arising quality of mind and heart. And that's what allows our practice, that's what allows investigation. That's what allows us to notice, in this case, tanha arising, notice in the moments it's present how it acts, notice when it goes away. And then notice that you expect, "Now I've conquered tanha, and it's gone." And how come I have to keep going through this over and over and over? We think, "Okay, once done, that's it." We're so disappointed. But who knows? Ten million mind moments in a day—actually, they say seventeen trillion in the blink of an eye, but let's stay with ten million in a day. It's already a lot. And our job is just to keep coming back and look and explore.

So everything I say tonight is from that—trying just to pique our interest, our exploration, and our trust in the Dhamma, our trust that when the obscuration isn't there and there's accurate recognition, you don't have to figure out how to abandon that craving. It stops making sense in that moment. And it's like—wow.

First, let me start talking about maybe some ideas we have about tanha, craving, often translated as wanting, desire, greed, all the different words. But as you know, this is not only greed; it's also pushing away.

One of the confusions that comes up a lot when we're thinking about it—not exactly just being there feeling that thirst, but thinking about it—is this: What's wrong with wanting things? We only would do something if we want things. What's wrong with wanting a better world? What's wrong with wanting a good relationship? What's wrong with wanting peanut butter at dinner? Whatever—what's wrong with wanting awakening? What's wrong with wanting to practice? And then we get all confused.

Something—and this is my particular thing—is recognizing that *tanha* is referring to, is a label for, a state of heart, a state of mind. *Tanha* is about the quality in the mind and heart, not about the object. All of those questions—what's wrong with wanting this or that?—all the attention gets focused on the object. And then we start getting confused.

But *tanha*, thirst, this leaning of "I need to have, I want to have"—and then it strengthens into grasping, *up adana*, holding on, clinging—it's the state in the heart, in the mind. And so there comes to be a linguistic confusion, because in English the word "desire" or the word "want" can actually be referring to very different qualities or states of heart and mind, very different mental states.

It's kind of symptomatic of the whole way our delusion works on so many different levels: all our attention is focused on the object, and we don't actually notice what's going on in the mind-heart. So it's a linguistic thing.

In Pali, *tanha*, this word that I've described as thirst, is very specific. There's another word, *chanda*, that is essentially neutral. *Chanda* is translated as a kind of excitement, a desire to do, an energy, an interest. Sometimes it's translated as zeal, a desire to act. So depending on what it's paired with—there's a word *dh ammachanda*—then there's this interest, this zeal, this willingness to act that is a wholesome quality, one that gives us the energy, the aspiration to practice the Dhamma.

So when we say, "What's wrong with wanting awakening? You have to want in order to be able to practice"—we're talking about this *chanda* energy. We're not talking about *tanha*. They're very different states of mind and heart. If we're only looking at the object, we never even notice the difference. And then we get really confused. "So there's good desires, there's bad desires"—and we go, "Well, what the heck?"

Chanda is also found in another pairing: *kamachanda*. *Kama*—not karma, but *kama—kamachanda* is the excitement of sense pleasures, leading into what is really the first hindrance. Not wholesome. That same zeal energy, but focused on the excitement of sense desires, which takes us into *tanha*. So that's *chanda*. There can be *dhammachanda*, zeal to do totally wholesome things.

The same object, though—even take wanting enlightenment. My guess is maybe many of you have experienced this: the thought is, "I really am dedicated to wanting enlightenment," but the internal experience is one of huge suffering and frustration. Have you ever experienced that? Am I making that up?

So we look and we say, "Well, but what's wrong with wanting enlightenment? It's the aspiration. What's the difference?" We get all worked up. Turn the attention around. That's *tanha*—this thirst, this craving, this quality that when it's present in the *citta* and unrecognized, we suffer. We don't see accurately. So here we want to really start exploring it.

The same thing with peanut butter for tea. You're just hungry. You need to go eat. Nothing wrong with that. We say, "I want to eat." Maybe you're hungry, maybe you're not. But "I've got to have peanut butter" or "I do not want another peanut butter! If they have peanut butter again, I'm going to scream! I'm going to write a note and put it on the bulletin board—for the well-being of all the yogis. It's not my personal preference; it's for everyone's well-being."

And I just want to say here and now: when that thought occurs to you about anything, we beg you—we beg you—do not put the note on the bulletin board. Take a twenty-four-hour period. See if it's still life and death, for the benefit of all beings, that this note goes up.

It may have changed in a 24-hour period. The qualities in your mind state may have changed. So we call that "yogi mind." It's wonderful terminology because it captures exactly what happens. It's like the

kilesas—greed in this case, or aversion—exaggerate. They do, don't they? It's like peanut butter becomes the bane of the planet when you're feeling that way. It exaggerates. And concentration magnifies. When those two come together, it's not a good combination.

We call it yogi mind. It happens. It happens to all of us. Because there is strong concentration. And again, you might be quite much more focused than you were ten days ago, even though you don't think it. You might be with the breath or something neutral or something wholesome. But then an unwholesome kilesa comes roaring up. We don't quite see it. And all that focus, that magnification goes in and—boom—it takes over.

We all have that. It's like, "Oh, I'm just the worst person who ever existed," for whatever reason. And when you say the reason the next day you go, "Huh?" You can't even imagine it. But anyway, that's a sidetrack.

To begin, I want to invite us to explore so we learn to recognize and see. Don't believe me or the Buddha, but as he said, he offers his teaching for us to come and see, explore, and learn to recognize with mindfulness and wisdom—sati-paññā—when tanha, this craving, this thirst, is present. How do you recognize it? And what's the effect of it? Why is it a problem? Why did the Buddha pick this out of everything as the cause of dukkha? So we turn around and take a look at that state.

I'm going to say some things about it. You may see your own things. Most of these we know, but if we really knew, right? We know, but we forget. Because it's so seductive. We've spent our life really in the thrall of craving—it's the only way we really know to be happy, to be at peace, to have some pleasant experience. That thirst, that leaning into it is just what we've learned. And because we keep getting focused out on the object, we don't recognize what's actually going on. We're giving all the potential for peace, for ease, for happiness to that particular object of mind—physical or mental—at that time. And it's just so seductive, it just pulls us along.

My brother used to have a hound dog, a red bone hound, a sweet dog. A hunting dog bred for hunting, which of course it didn't get to do in downtown Atlanta, but he did have a backyard. Sweet dog, but the nose was so highly bred for scents. That dog was led by his nose. He would come in the house and just follow his nose to every new smell, every new thing. When I would come to visit, if I left my suitcase open, he'd be immediately in the suitcase sniffing any dirty clothes or anything that had a scent of person on it. He was immediately in there, pulling it out of the suitcase and chewing on it. When he'd go outside in the yard, he couldn't just go play like a dog. He just had his nose on the ground and had to go around following every scent.

That, to me, is craving. That's how it works. We're just led by it, led by it, led by it, and we have no clue that there's another way, that there's something else going on here.

So it gives us this kind of tunnel vision too. When the craving is strong and we're on the thing, that's all we want. Everything else is in the way. Have you noticed that, even with little things?

Or like when you're in line. I can see I'm really sidetracking here. A friend told me about this—when you're in line to get on a bus or something, and there aren't assigned seats, so you don't know if there will be enough seats, and there's a big crowd. I'm from New York, so my New Yorkness really comes out. I could blame it on New York, but I have to blame it on craving. It's like, shh, go for it, and everyone else is in your way. In the way. You get the seat, you sit down, and then—ah, may you be happy, may you be peaceful, everybody else. I hope you all get a seat once I have mine. But until I have it? Tunnel vision, craving, get away.

My friend told me that many years ago he was somewhere in China, way out in the middle of nowhere—Dunhuang, I think. And like one bus a day came to get out of there. So he'd been there, done his thing, and then he's waiting at six in the morning for the bus. The bus comes, and it's like a mob of people. While fighting, they all get on the bus, it fills up, and it goes. And he's just standing there. He didn't want to fight. He's trying to be the nice tourist. So they all get in, and it goes away. He's like, oh, twenty-four hours till the next bus comes. So he made sure he got on the next one.

Abandoning craving doesn't mean we can't see what's going on.

So it's like that—it leads us by the nose, creates tunnel vision. But the seduction is that real promise of happiness. As you know, we really think this next thing is going to do it. And of course we've talked about it and will more—the whole sense of not being sufficient, how craving accentuates our lack of wholeness, all of that. But I'm going to stay really with exploring it in our present moment experience as a quality of heart that's often experienced concomitantly. There are physical expressions that may come with it, so that we can really explore and see what's going on in the mind and body when taṇhā is present.

It has that seductive quality too—the next one's going to do it if this one didn't. The next one's going to do it if this one didn't. Watching professional sports is a lot like that, isn't it? I happen to be, for God knows why, a big fan of professional tennis. And it's been really interesting the last couple of years to watch what goes on in my mind around that. Really interesting.

The mind wants to pick one person that it's kind of wanting to win. And once that happens, all this energy—every back and forth, every point, there's a sense of wanting it to go a certain way. Wanting, oh, okay, that one was good. There's happiness. Well, no, that one wasn't good. Unhappy—but now there's another one. This one will be good. Oh, that was good, but now there has to be another one. This has to be good. This has to be good. And no, no, no, this has to be good. And then finally they win the match. But that's one match, then there's seven matches, and finally the tournament. The tournament's over, and if that one person out of a hundred and twenty-eight won the tournament—phew. What happiness. But it never ends. You get a day and then there's the next tournament, and the whole thing starts over again.

And I notice in myself—if I'm watching and it's two people I really don't care about, it's actually much more pleasant. I'm really watching and it's like, wow, this is really nice. I'm not wanting, no, wanting, no. It's more like, oh, look at that, that's very interesting, very skillful. I can turn it off when I've had enough. I

don't have to keep watching.

Or going online shopping, like looking for a rug.

Just pick one website, go to eBay. Put in the size rug you want—10,200 choices, right? I'm not exaggerating. You think, well, there's no way I'm going to look at 10,200 choices. But it comes up and you know, well, just one more page. Just one more page. Five hours later.

And we think this is making us happy. That's the seduction. We're clueless. As the Buddha said in the definition—seeking delight, now here, now there. And what's so interesting is that if we don't turn around and look at the craving, we can easily mistake the craving itself for the delight. We mix it up.

So seeking delight. You get off after five hours. I do turn it off before that, the eBay. But you feel horrible. You have a headache. Your eyes are bugging out. Half the day is over. You didn't find a rug anyway. And even if you did, it doesn't look like what it looked like online. So it's a waste of time completely. And then we turn around and say, oh, what could I do now? Maybe I'll have some ice cream. What's the next thing? What's the next thing?

I have a very wise friend who knew this perfectly well. We were having a conversation. This is a person who's very careful, always likes to have a couple of cookies after lunch. Not pigging out, not a lot, just two cookies every day after lunch—but has to have two cookies every day after lunch, certain kinds of cookies. So we were laughing and talking about craving, and I said, this is really the essence of samsara. Thinking those cookies will make you happy. "But they do make me happy," he said. I said, right, okay. But what about when you can't get a cookie? He says, "Oh, I'll always get a cookie."

This keeps us bound to samsara. Samsara, the endless round—the red bone hound, the next, the next, the next. Wanting sense pleasure, wanting to become, wanting a state, wanting—and all the while thinking this is what's going to bring peace and happiness. Not really recognizing it. It's really poignant, really touching that we do this.

The Buddha speaks about what Bhikkhu Bodhi describes as three movements in the unfolding process of insight. You see it around tanha, you see it around many things. The three movements are recognizing the gratification in a particular experience, recognizing the danger in a particular experience, and then recognizing the escape.

This is from the Buddha himself: "Before my enlightenment, O bhikkhus"—bhikkhus technically means monks, but it also means anyone who's practicing, so bhikkhus, like he's speaking to us—"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. That the world is impermanent, bound up with dissatisfaction, with unreliability, and subject to change—this is the danger in the world. The abandoning of desire and lust for the world—this is the escape from the world."

Notice he's saying the abandoning of desire and lust. He's not saying abandon the world. There's a huge difference. When we talk about renunciation, renunciation is the abandoning of the craving that keeps us bound to samsara. It doesn't mean we're necessarily abandoning the world.

So, that there is gratification—there is. Even though the Buddha talks so much about the danger of sense pleasures—the danger being because they're so seductive, because we get so lost, because we don't bring in mindfulness wisdom, satipaññā, and investigate what's really happening—we just keep getting sucked in, like the examples I gave.

But it's true that there's gratification. Sometimes people say—and we hear this frequently—"Well, if there's no clinging, if I'm not supposed to cling or have thirst for pleasant experience, what if everything's just all the same? Who cares? You don't like anything. You go out in nature—so what? It's green, it's gray, who cares? It's a turkey, it's a worm, who cares?" And I think, again, people aren't interested in nibbida because of this misunderstanding. But that's not what it is at all.

It is important to distinguish between indulging in sense pleasures and the joy and happiness that we experience when we are mindful and at peace. Attachment to sense pleasures brings about suffering and entanglement, both in the present moment and the future, for ourselves and others. The Buddha often talks about agitation through clinging—that's what Thich Nhat Hanh is pointing to, the attachment to sense pleasures. But the joy and happiness of a peaceful mind bring neither suffering nor attachment in the present or in the future, for ourselves or for others.

So we can really explore the difference here. Not putting a "should" on it, but genuinely explore the difference. Let's take nature as an example. You go out and see the beautiful moon. There can be a real appreciation, there can be a sense of joy, or there could be a real sense of craving and thirst. These will feel quite different in the heart-mind. Explore that.

To explore it means we have to have the willingness to trust, to understand that when craving arises, it's arising due to causes and conditions. It's a habit of mind. So we're not talking about craving to say, "I'm not going to let it come. I'm not going to see it." We don't have to be afraid of it. If we meet it with wisdom—well, we can't control the wisdom, but we keep meeting it with mindfulness, and the wisdom comes. We don't need to be afraid of craving. It's another mind state.

So it comes. There's joy, you're appreciating the moon, and the craving comes in. Notice that narrowing. Notice that kind of leaning forward. The craving actually brings a sense of dissatisfaction with it. Rather than trying to fix things, it tries to fix them, but it actually is what brought up the dissatisfaction in the first place. Don't believe me—look and see.

So, not to be afraid, but really watch. See the difference. There is appreciation. We don't hate sense pleasures. But we really want to see the difference between just being with "it's like this now"—exquisitely silent, just like this, the happiness of the mind at rest, of seeing clearly—versus "I wish I'd gotten up at five

to see that moon the other night and I didn't do it, and it won't happen for another 150 years. Oh, that's nice, but it's only a quarter moon now and it was so beautiful..." You know, now we're in a whole other world. Be there with that too.

So the gratification is real. But the danger—we really start to notice what the Buddha points to—the danger is the fact that craving can't satisfy us because of impermanence, which intellectually we know. But I want to emphasize even more the danger being that seductive quality that we don't really recognize. Something changed, but we don't really see it. Like with tennis, we just go, "Okay, the next one, the next one, the next one." Or the cookies, or the next page on eBay. Instead of seeing that everything's changed, that there's nothing to cling to, the clinging just keeps propelling us to the next thing.

This seductive quality, this onward-going quality that just keeps us locked in—to me, just me personally, that's one of the biggest dangers if we don't see it. If we overlook the heart-mind space of clinging and keep focusing on the object, we miss this danger. Because even though the object changes, we always find another object. And even if we don't get it, we have reasons why we didn't get it. And the object isn't necessarily a sense pleasure—it's a state of mind. Often we can get really locked into craving for states of mind here.

Probably that hasn't happened to anybody. But you know, it does happen sometimes to a rare meditator that they're craving a particular experience. And if you get it, then you lose it and it's suffering. If you don't get it, you're miserable. So either way, look at the craving rather than being satisfied with the object.

So that's one danger—the narrowing. All the craving mind sees is what it craves, and everything else is in the way. Like I was saying about getting on a bus or getting on a plane. I do that a lot, get on planes, and I get to watch this all the time. You're waiting. Am I going to have an empty seat next to me? Will there be an empty seat? And everyone getting on is the enemy until they're past me. Until the doors close, you know, just watching that. That's the suffering—the constriction, the separation, a sense of me versus others. And that's the unwholesomeness that we can't see accurately.

To me, the biggest danger, the most poignant one, is what I mentioned in the beginning: that when there's taṇhā in the mind, in terms of greed, in terms of aversion, in terms of delusion, it distorts accurate recognition. That is the veil that blocks recognizing our true nature. That is the veil that keeps us locked into saṃsāra, that keeps us from recognizing the radiance of the pure citta, as the Buddha talked about. And we get locked into wanting more, wanting more, wanting more. We don't see that it's the very wanting that's the thing that's blocking—as Ajahn Amaro likes to talk about—the natural peace and ease of mind and body. It's our natural peace and ease. The taṇhā is what blocks it.

I think someone, maybe Dara, said this quotation about how wisdom, paññā, when citta is recognizing accurately, when there's wisdom in the mind—it recognizes the natural characteristics of whatever the object is: sense pleasure, seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, mental experience. So wisdom recognizes, maybe a sound, it might recognize it as a bell, but it also recognizes that it's impermanent, that

it's changing, that it's got no intrinsic inherent stability, that it's unreliable. I don't mean that with every sound, if there's wisdom, you go, "Oh yes, hearing, impermanent, unreliable." It just knows that. It recognizes it accurately. Craving doesn't arise. Aversion doesn't arise.

Delusion, when these qualities are present in the citta, distorts perception and we don't recognize these qualities accurately. But the object is recognized. So there's still hearing. There's still a bell. But the impermanent qualities, the unreliable non-self qualities, aren't recognized. And that's when we just get into a whole lot of trouble. Because the way we respond and relate is what keeps the taṇhā going. It distorts our perception. So to me, in a way, that is the most poignant aspect of the danger of taṇhā, of craving, of aversion, of confusion.

Escape. Well, first, to begin with, rather than jumping to complete absence, complete abandonment of taṇhā—when you notice it arising, our tendency, in itself, and you don't know this unless you explore, but in my experience, the experience of thirst, of craving, of leaning forward mentally and physically, is unpleasant. And our deeply conditioned way to escape from unpleasant is... what? What do we do when something's unpleasant? What do we do to get happy?

The Buddha said it's the only escape an unenlightened worldling knows. That's most of us, I would assume. I love that word, puthujjana, unenlightened worldling. The only escape we know, we know no other escape from unpleasant than the seeking out of and experiencing pleasure. So the minute an unpleasant experience arises—pleasant, unpleasant, neutral, just this simple vedanā that James introduced the other morning, and I think Aaron will talk about more fully in a couple of nights. It's such a key experience. It's so subtle. We don't notice it. Unpleasant vedanā in a sight, a sound, an internal feeling, a mood comes up, and boom, the mind goes towards something pleasant. That's just what we've learned.

And as the Buddha said, we know of no other escape, the worldling, from unpleasant than the seeking of pleasure, and then that becomes the habit that underlies the mind. We seek pleasure, we have the habit of resisting the unpleasant, and neutral—what? Is there neutral? We've got no clue in life what's going on with neutral.

That is really, to me, so poignant. It's one of the most poignant things.

Knowing that this is the case, perhaps it wouldn't be our first response to keep the sati, the mindfulness, going when tanha arises—when you notice that closing in, or that leaning forward, or the tightness, however you notice it. Rather than jumping to get something else, or going to aversion and blaming yourself, just recognize that this is the next arising experience. It's a mental experience. Let the mindfulness meet it. How does it feel? What does it feel like? Is there a reflection in the physical body? I generally find it unpleasant, but look and see. Turn the attention back whenever you notice tanha.

This is something we're going to have many chances to explore, and that's wonderful. Instead of it being a problem—and it is a problem when we're not aware of it—but instead of being a problem, people often

come and say, "Oh no, it's hopeless. I'm seeing cravings so much," and they get disheartened. Understandably so. Why? Because we don't want it there, it's unpleasant, and we want to be happy.

But if we could say, "Okay, every time you notice craving, that's an opportunity to meet it with mindfulness and wisdom"—not to make it go away. That's not mindfulness. We know that, right? We know that if you're mindful properly, it doesn't mean the difficult thing disappears. Do we all understand this? That's not the point of mindfulness. The point of mindfulness is to meet what's happening just as it is. And the steadiness of mindfulness allows for wisdom to see how it acts.

So when you notice tanha, explore it. Some useful inquiries might be: How do you even know it's there? Is it a thought? Is it a physical experience? I get a kind of tightness in my chest—it's almost like physically leaning forward. Sometimes I notice what feels like a measurable tightness in my mind. Sometimes it's just a thought. You notice you've been planning for the last five minutes: "And then when I get to lunch, I'm going to do this... Five more minutes and I can go to bed... How am I going to manage to get the shower at this time?" And after a while you notice—hmm. This could be tanha. It's possible.

So then, instead of going, "Oh no, how can I stop it?"—land in it. Bring in the attention. How does it feel, mentally, physically? What thoughts does it bring up, if any? How does it affect perceptions when it's present in the mind? How does it feed our intentions and our choices? How do we act when there's tanha in the mind? Really hang out with it and explore it.

And sometimes, you know, it's so strong that you just cannot help doing the thing. I'm speaking of simple things here, within the bounds of the precepts, but simple things—you just can't resist.

Well, something that happens for me in walking meditation—somebody walks by, and I just want to look. Why? It's not like it's a horrible thing to look, but the craving to look can be so strong. So I'll notice the craving, and sometimes it's so strong I can't not look. Basically, the craving is stronger than the mindfulness. That's all that's happening. So I look.

You do it. Bring the mindfulness along with you. You're acting from the craving, but you can still bring the mindfulness along with you and see what happens.

So an example for me: I was walking, quite present with mindfulness, and then craving arises—I've got to look, I've got to look. I look, and right away there's seeing, right away there's a judgment. They're better than me, they're worse than me, oh that person, or what are they... So there's the judgment, and that's unpleasant. Then there's self-judgment for judging. And it was like, "That was really a good move, right? That was really a good thing to do, to look there." Then you come back and you're walking again, and it was fine before.

Bring the awareness along with you. That's where the wisdom comes in. Sooner or later, the mind goes, "Oh, that craving doesn't really make sense. It really doesn't."

So first we're able to just hang with it. Okay, it's unpleasant. You're not going to die from it—I really promise. You're not going to die from it. And if you keep hanging with that particular craving, walking back and forth, make yourself a pact once in a while if you get interested: you're just going to keep walking until that particular craving dies away. It will, and probably a lot quicker than you think.

Keep watching. "Oh, it died away, good, I'm out of here." No—keep watching. Keep the mindfulness going. Notice what it's like. For me, when the craving goes, if you stay mindful, it's like... ah, peace. And that's the natural peace and ease of mind that we were looking for in the first place. Why in the world the mind thought looking at the person passing was going to give me that peace and ease, I don't know. But notice when the craving goes.

Over and over we do this, and we really learn. We can see: okay, it's an unpleasant experience, and it's telling me a story that is really hard not to believe. Don't set yourself up—if you set yourself "I can't" or "I shouldn't do this," then you're just bringing in more tightness. Rather, just say, "Okay, you're really going to let mindfulness be there, whatever you're doing," and the wisdom comes.

Because this is yathā bhūta—things as they've come to be, as they really are. You really see that the craving is not serving the purpose we think it is, that it's actually the cause of the dissatisfaction. Literally, in the moment, as well as in the future, as well as in our understanding—in the exact moment, it's the cause of the dissatisfaction.

So hanging with cravings. Okay, it's just mental and physical sensations. It's really not such a big deal. A lot of the time. Sometimes it is—don't beat yourself up about that. But there are a ton of little times when you can really explore it here. Ah, peace. Just the peace of mind and heart being with things as they are.

I want to read a couple of quotations because I like them. From Ajahn Chah, on why we don't recognize the craving—he talks about the flood. He's talking about sense pleasures, but I want you to know this is also about mental experience. Views and opinions is something the Buddha talked about very much as a source of grasping. And I think I'll talk about it in a whole other talk, because it's really huge. We hold on to a thought, a view—"It's like this. This is true, everything else is false." Of course, we don't say that. Then we're attached to it. The attachment is the problem.

It brings us into conflict with ourselves and others. So it's not just sense pleasures, but it's that same craving, that narrowing, that inability—in the grip of the craving—to see that there's any other possibility, to appreciate anything else. It's just this.

So we're sunk, as Ajahn Chah says. Sunk in sights, in sounds, in smells, in tastes, in bodily sensations. You might think that sounds like our mindfulness practice—we're aware of all of these—but we're sunk because we only look at externals. We don't look inwardly, meaning looking at what's going on in the mind at that moment.

This is still Ajahn Chah, and I'm sure you've probably heard this, but it's so beautiful. He says how the

mind within itself is already peaceful. That the mind is not peaceful these days is because it follows moods. The real mind is simply an aspect of nature. It becomes peaceful or agitated because moods deceive it. Sense impressions, including mental ones, come and trick it into happiness, suffering, gladness, and sorrow. But the mind's true nature is none of those things. That gladness or sadness is not the mind, but a mood coming to deceive us. The untrained mind gets lost and follows these things. It forgets itself. But really the mind is unmoving and peaceful, just like a leaf which is still as long as no wind blows. If a wind comes up, the leaf flutters. The fluttering is due to the wind. The fluttering is due to the sense impressions. The mind follows them. If it doesn't follow them, it doesn't flutter. So if we know fully the true nature of sense impressions, we will be unmoved.

That's the key. This is the power of mindfulness and stability of mind—to allow us to know fully the sense impressions, to allow us to know fully, for wisdom to know, not personally, the qualities of the taṇhā in the mind and the qualities of the peace and stillness when it vanishes.

James reminded me of this—one of my favorite quotations from the Buddha, from the Sutta Nipāta. Bhikkhu Bodhi just put out a new translation of the Sutta Nipāta, which is wonderful. The Sutta Nipāta is generally accepted as one of the earliest of the books of the Suttas, so some people think it's maybe the closest to what the Buddha actually taught. And some of it's quite radical, particularly when talking about non-attachment to views.

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

I just love that. We're not trying to get rid of anything. We see just what contact does, and so their craving ends. It's not an act of will. It's the natural effect of a moment of wisdom in the heart, in the mind. And the steady mindfulness with just what is occurring—taṇhā is a perfect example—is what gives us that possibility.

I'll end with two other quotations. This is from Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche, who is a brother of Mingyur Rinpoche and Tsoknyi Rinpoche. He's also a wonderful teacher. He says—this is in a more Tibetan framework—that the mind, the pure mind, is the Buddha. When the mind is free of reference points and grasping at characteristics of sense impressions, then it is unobscured, unveiled. And when in that state, it is the Buddha. Because in that state, all obscurations, all phenomena, naturally dissolve. Just the arising and the passing.

They're naturally dissolving anyway. But in that state, that's what's recognized.

I'll end with a suggestion from the Buddha, a reflective contemplation. I was doing a self-retreat in

November, reading various teachings from the Buddha. And this is so different from the habit of how my mind works.

This is a specific instruction regarding disenchantment or dispassion. Often what we're encouraged to do is notice the drawbacks of being involved—much of what I've been talking about tonight: the danger, the drawbacks of taṇhā, and why it doesn't work. But another way to approach this is to actually incline the mind towards the deathless, to incline the mind towards that natural purity.

This is the Buddha offering a reflection: "A bhikkhu reflects thus: This is peaceful. This is sublime. That is the stilling of all activities, the relinquishment of all acquisitions, the ending of craving, dispassion, nibbāna."

Instead of being all caught up in "What should I do? How can I do it? What can I get? How can I stop it?"—just this:

This is peaceful. This is sublime. That is the stilling of all activities, the relinquishment of all acquisitions, the ending of craving, dispassion, nibbāna.

Let's just sit for a moment.

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