Craving and Grasping: The Crisis of Dukkha

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 53:20

Joseph talked the other night about the life of the Buddha. When he was first enlightened there under the Bodhi tree, some of the texts tell us that at first he was not so inclined to spend the rest of his life teaching. It says he looked around with his omniscient eye and thought that this truth he had discovered is so profound, so hard to see—you can't discover it just by thinking about it. And looking around, they tell us he thought people are relying so much on attachment, they're delighting in attachment, and so it will be too hard for them to see this truth. And so his mind favored inaction.

It really feels like that when we're in the middle of this process here. Often we're too lost in attachment and aversion. It's impossible to see the truth. At this point in the retreat, talking to different people and talking with the other teachers, you're really right down in the middle of your process. And I don't know if you realize it—it takes a sense of perspective. Often it can feel like it's nothing but attachment, nothing but aversion. What am I doing here? Forget it. So this is really encouraging that the Buddha thought the same thing.

The story goes that at this point, Brahma, the head of the Brahma realm, came down and begged the Buddha to teach. He asked him to look around again and said that there are people with little dust in their eyes—which is a phrase that I love—and that they can hear and see and understand and know the truth. And this is when the Buddha's heart of compassion was opened, and he spent the rest of his life teaching.

As you know, the first teaching that he gave was of the Four Noble Truths, which we've talked about briefly. Tonight I want to focus mostly on the second one.

The first truth is the truth of unsatisfactoriness—just its existence, the different forms of it, our need to open to it. The second truth is the origin of this dukkha, the origin being craving. Craving which produces renewal of being over and over again. Craving which creates suffering because we're craving what is elusive, what is insubstantial, what is always changing and can't bring satisfaction. Because craving blinds us. When it's present in our experience, it blinds us to clear perception, to being able to see and understand the truth.

The third truth, just briefly mentioning, is cessation of this very dukkha. The words, the description, are cessation of this craving without a trace left behind. The abandonment, the renunciation, the liberation from, the detachment from this craving. Not hating it, repressing it, hating ourselves—but abandonment, liberation from, detachment from the craving. And then the fourth truth, of course, is the Eightfold Path: that there is a way leading to cessation of dukkha, and that this cessation, in a nutshell, comes from wisely seeing.

Tonight I want to focus on the origin of unsatisfactoriness—this craving, tanha, like thirst—and its stronger component, which is the one that in some ways we can see more easily: grasping. The simile that's given is that craving is like groping in the dark to take something. The mind inclines towards an experience, an object. Grasping is the actual grabbing it and stealing it. It's a stronger impetus, a stronger force. And this is what gives rise in the moment to concepts of me, I, mine.

In our experience, in our life, when we really are looking closely, when we break it down, there are only six possible sense experiences to have. And they just keep occurring over and over. There's eye contact, there's sight, there's hearing, there's taste, there's smell, there's feeling in the body, there's mental objects—and that's it. They just keep happening over and over.

When there's contact—when, say, sight, an eye object, and the eye come together and there's eye consciousness—that sense impression, that contact, in any moment of any of these contacts, craving and grasping can arise in relation to that particular sense impression, that particular contact. When this contact and the possibly resultant craving is met with mindfulness, right there with it, it doesn't especially need to go any farther. That's just it. And then it's a new sense experience.

But as is so often the case, when it's not seen at this point, the moment of craving strengthens into grasping. Oh, that smells so good. I really want it. How can I get it? And we go off into a whole world of need and fantasy and desire. And that grasping blinds us.

We get really fixated on whatever it is—that pleasant smell—and how can we obtain it? How can we have more of it? It clouds our perception.

There's a passage from the Sutta Nipata: "For some people, contact, which is the point where sense plus the sense object meet—for some people this 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."

It's one of the more poetic phrases of the Buddha.

Put in a different way by Ajahn Chah, again speaking to the power of seeing what sense contact is, sense impression: "But really, this mind of ours is already unmoving and peaceful, really 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 those sense impressions. The mind follows them. If it doesn't follow them, it doesn't flutter. If we know fully the true nature of sense impressions, we are unconcerned."

So really this is our investigation—to really know the nature of our sense impressions. How and why craving and grasping arise. And from that knowing, the mind can become still or unconcerned.

But often, most realistically, we're not aware of that process right at that point of contact. Perhaps

grasping has taken quite a firm hold in our experience before we even notice what the original contact was. We wake up in a really strong fantasy, say, of food. We didn't even notice the pleasant smell, but the next thing we know we've been going for ten minutes in our mind about what's for lunch, really deciding what it is based on the smell, looking forward to eating it and all the pleasure we're going to get out of it. We're really grasping. And it blinds us.

We go to lunch. It's not at all, even remotely, what we had thought it was. And so we're disgruntled, dissatisfied with everything that's served. Grasping is blinding in this way. It distorts the object that's grasped onto and it distorts everything else. The idea of what everyone was expecting for lunch turns into this incredible, fantastic idea of a meal that was going to bring us lasting happiness. Completely distorted—nothing can do that. And then the lunch that is served is seen as a mud pile or something. There's nothing wrong with the lunch that is served. Everything's completely distorted. We can't appreciate what is present when the mind is fixated, grasping on some object.

There's a story about a pickpocket in the time of the Buddha who said he was at one of the Buddha's discourses but could only see people's pockets. Impossible to hear what's being taught when we're fixated on something.

So our practice here is not to judge it, hate it and hate ourselves, but to investigate, to see and come to understand this process. As Krishnamurti said, "Unless the ways of desire are understood, illusion is inevitable."

And the Buddha also encourages us to understand how grasping works. He says, "There are many kinds of suffering in the world and all of them grow from the same source: grasping. When a person knows no better, he or she gives way to this grasping and slow and dulled goes through one misery after another. So use your knowledge to see how suffering begins and develops in attachment."

We can use our knowledge to see and feel and understand this process. And how can we do that except by investigating it very fully when it is present in our experience? Not hating it or fearing it or trying to pretend it's not really happening, but really looking. Because without an experiential understanding of the nature of desire and grasping, we can intellectually decide, "Yeah, right, it's clear how craving and grasping leads to suffering, so I'm going to stop doing it now." It doesn't work. We need to really understand this deeply on a visceral, gut level.

So what is it?

How do we experience grasping in a moment? We're sitting calmly. Experiences are coming and going. We're noting and being present. There's a sound. There's a thought. There's the breath. There's an image. There's a sensation in the body. And suddenly one particular object is grasped hold of. A smell. *The* smell. Not going any further—when that happens next, just notice: how does it feel? What is the experience of clinging, of grasping itself?

For me, there's actually a physical sensation of tightness, almost like an internal leaning forward. It feels really unbalanced, unpleasant. When out of this flow of changing sensations one sound is isolated and grasped onto, and that grasping is not really seen, then comes the identification. Immediately the sense of "me" gets strong, and all the constructions go along with it. Self-image is created in that process. One moment of grasping conditions the next. It gets stronger and stronger, and it gets really complicated.

Here's an example that's probably happened to almost everyone here. There's a sound. It's unpleasant. And out of all the sounds that come and go during one sitting, this particular sound is grasped onto, isolated. Immediately the sense of recognition and the sense of "I" comes up: "That's someone moving. It's not me. I'm not moving. I know better than to move and make noise during a sitting. What's the matter with that person?" Really solid. One grasping leads to the next. The sense of self gets rock hard. And the distortion again—that sound is exaggerated in our perception out of all proportion. Although some people might not believe that. But it really is exaggerated out of all proportion to what the sound actually was or will be again.

Our mind at this point is really unbalanced. It's wavering. It can't perceive clearly what's happening in this moment. And because of that, it's more difficult to perceive what's happening in the next moment—never mind appreciating what's happening in this moment or the next. Grasping sets up an immediate sense of separation, an immediate sense of me and other. There can't be a sense of interrelatedness going on when this is happening.

Another example—the classic example—the VR, the vipassana romance. There's someone that one's mind has fastened on. It could be a vipassana vendetta too; it really doesn't matter. But someone one's mind has fastened on in this way of really isolating out. You're outside walking, very present, a real sense of peace, aware of the trees, aware of the sensations of the foot. And there's a sight, which happens to be this person walking by. That particular sight, that form, that color—out of all the sights and forms and colors arising moment after moment—is grasped onto. In a moment of that grasping not being seen, thought arises: "Oh me, oh where's that person going? Maybe I should stop walking now and follow them."

I wonder if they know who I am. I wonder if we'll ever have a chance to talk to each other. And then the whole story unfolds. The sense of separation has become complete. The mind is really locked onto the object.

How aware can one be in that moment of anything else? Any sense of awareness of the sensations in movement is long gone. Maybe one still knows one's walking, but it's kind of vague. Any other person who might be in the way—if you're trying to follow—is perceived as just that: in my way, rather than as another being. Any sense of our mutual interrelatedness is gone. It's merely the object grasped and me very strongly, and everything else in the way. It's a very powerful force, and it happens over and over and over.

Contrast that with walking in the same place in those times when there's just that pure sense of nothing

special—sensations of the lifting, awareness of sensation, possibly of the wind on the cheek, smell of freshness. You happen to open your eyes and see the exquisite vividness of the leaves. And there's nothing really special in that moment, but there's such an appreciation, such a sense of presence.

Often on retreat, when I have a moment like that which feels so peaceful, I've been stopping and asking, "Well, what's actually going on here?" And what's going on is the absence of grasping. The absence of that sense of me and other, of something taking me out of the moment. This is the peace of non-grasping. It's a completeness in this moment, exactly as this moment is, without needing to subtract anything or add anything.

Sometimes it can seem to be a subtler kind of happiness or peace than that which we experience from sense pleasures, for example. Often that's why I think we get seduced by more obvious seeming pleasures than the peace of non-grasping. But it is a very powerful kind of peace. And as we continue to see and understand the nature of attachment, this underlying tendency to grasp at the pleasant begins to weaken and fade.

We also begin to notice that when the mind is locked into grasping, at that moment we don't really have any clear discernment. We can't really judge what is appropriate or suitable action because we just follow the desire. It's so strong; our mind is just locked into it.

A personal story. I wasn't going to tell this again—I hadn't told it for a couple of years—but the other person involved I just saw recently. He didn't know I used it in a talk, but he brought it up. He said, "Do you ever remember that ride to the airport?" And I said, "Yeah, as a matter of fact, I use it in a talk." He said, "Well, you better put in my side of it and not just talk from your side." So I'm not sure whether I do or not. You can tell me later.

But anyway, it's a classic story of how grasping blinds us, how we can't use any kind of clear discernment in that process.

I was in England. I was in a relationship with this guy, and it was a new relationship. He lived in England, and I was living here as a resident teacher. I'd managed to squeeze a week off and go over to England to visit. He lived out in the country, and the day I was leaving to fly out, we had come back to London and were staying in a friend's flat. The friend was away, and everyone we knew in London was out of town.

The next morning, I was getting up and getting ready to take a taxi to the train that goes to the airport, which is very simple and direct. But he—this was his grasping—he got it in his mind, "Oh no, I want to drive you to the airport." So he could have some more time together, so he could do something for me. Now, two things: one, he's American and didn't know how to drive in England very well, and two, neither of us knew London at all.

I said, "Forget it. I'm really happy to take the train." And so we spent about an hour and a half bickering about this. This was our last morning together. His grasping was, "I've got to do that." We couldn't see

clearly, and that ruined our whole last morning. I finally got to where I couldn't stand it and said, "Okay, you can take me to the airport."

Now then, that's when we realized we didn't know how to get there. The taxi was canceled, and it was too late to get the train.

In London they have these maps called London A to Z—very small pages with every street on them. But they don't give you the whole picture. You can know where you are and get to the end of the map, and it will tell you to go to the next map. But it doesn't tell you how to get from here to there. You can't look at the whole thing in between.

We started going crazy. And then I started really grasping: "Oh my God, I'm going to miss the plane." It was one of those instant purchase tickets, absolutely no refund. I didn't have money to buy another ticket, and I had to be back at work. I shouldn't even have left for a week.

So we finally called around, found a way to go, and got in the car. He was fine by this time because his grasping was over—he got to drive me. I was a basket case. We got in the car, and again, we were totally not enjoying our time together because I was just wanting us to be at the airport. Every moment that we weren't there was a moment that was in the way. There was no way to appreciate it.

We were doing okay. We whizzed through London, got out on the motorway. We were really cutting it close. And halfway down the motorway, it came to an absolute dead stop—complete traffic jam, not moving.

I just exploded in this frenzy of grasping: "Oh my God, I'm really going to miss it." And then I realized, yeah, I am going to miss it. Okay, so I'll miss the plane. That'll be interesting. I've never missed an international flight. I'll miss it.

And my grasping stopped. Then I was fine. I started looking around. "Oh, well, this is interesting."

He, of course, then realized, "Oh, she really might miss it." And he started grasping: "Oh my God, I've got to get her there on time." So he was going crazy. "Let me just get off at the next exit and take you a different way." I said, "But you don't even know where we are. If we get off at the next exit, we're really lost."

Anyway, we finally got to the airport. I think I had fifteen minutes before the plane. So then I thought I could make it again, and the grasping returned. Going through customs and everything, everyone in my way was a total object—someone to run over, someone to push aside, someone to get rid of.

The whole morning, never mind that the idea was to have a pleasant few hours together. And this is what grasping really does. We're totally blind to what we're doing, and in each step it seems to make sense because we're so fixated. The grasping itself is so unpleasant—that feeling of grasping—that we'll do anything to attain its object, basically to get rid of that feeling.

One thing I really think we need to appreciate is just how deep, how strongly conditioned this underlying tendency of the mind to grasp onto the pleasant is. We need to appreciate it not because that's discouraging, but because then we can understand for ourselves just how awesome this journey is that we're on. It's a possible journey. It's not impossible. But it's really an awesome journey of discovery.

And it takes a lot of commitment and a lot of courage—which everyone here has, or you wouldn't still be here, no matter what's going on. This points to the real importance of patience and equanimity.

It may not seem like much when you're sitting here and you become aware that your mind is filled with grasping—at the idea of whatever, wanting a sitting to be a certain way. And then noting, you note the grasping and it kind of fades out, and the mind is again calm. This can happen in many moments within one sitting, and it seems like no big deal because we tend to focus on how much the clinging and grasping arises again.

But that moment of seeing, of the fading out—it is a big deal. It is really important because that is a movement from distortion and blindness towards clarity and freedom. And I think it's important to acknowledge that in ourselves.

Classically in the Theravada, they talk about four different areas of grasping. I find it helpful to explore these as different ways of looking at how grasping comes up. There's grasping to sense desire, which is obvious. Grasping onto views, ideas about things. Grasping onto rites and rituals. And grasping onto the tendency to identification, the idea of self.

Sense desire—I'll just say something about it. It's nothing new to any of us. This is from Ledi Sayadaw, a definition of grasping which to me seems to apply particularly to grasping to sense pleasures: "It's laying a firm hold on. It implies the inability to shake off a thing, even after experiencing great pain due to it and perceiving its many harmful consequences."

I can really see this so clearly in the realm of sense pleasures. On some level, I know the next pleasant sight, the next pleasant sound, the next pleasant taste is not going to make me any more happy or peaceful than the last pleasant sound or the last pleasant taste. But I continue—we continue—to keep going after it, to keep trying to find the one that will do it, waiting for the sweet one.

The Buddha talked a lot, and quite graphically, about the perils of sense pleasures. Just to give you an idea of some of his similes: he compares them to a charcoal pit; to something borrowed, because the owner takes it back; to a dream, because on waking it's just gone. Those are some of the nicer ones. He uses these similes because the danger in sense pleasures is great.

What I feel is really important to understand in our own experience is not that pleasant sensation is bad. We're not striving to get rid of all pleasant sensation and only have unpleasant sensation, and then we'll be free. The danger is that when there's contact—a pleasant contact, a sense pleasure—the underlying tendency of mind to grasp is so strong. And this is what I find really interesting: in some subtle way, it's as

if we delight in that. And because of that delight, we don't see the suffering. We don't see the danger.

We were talking about this in our Pali class a few weeks ago, going over this second noble truth. One way of translating it is that it's just this craving, leading from birth to birth, which is accompanied by delight and passion. The craving itself is accompanied by delight and finds pleasure and satisfaction now here, now there. As we were exploring, we're seeing that the subtle danger is that on some level we like to crave. The craving can be accompanied by delight when we don't really look, when we don't really pay attention. And so we don't recognize the danger, and we keep going through these endless rounds of craving the next thing, craving the next thing.

We can't see what's really happening. It's so easy to get lost in the cycle of grasping and becoming and suffering. The danger is not in sense objects themselves but in not seeing the clinging.

Suzuki Roshi says that renunciation does not consist in giving up the things of the world but in accepting that they go away. When we really, truly accept that this too is going to go away, there's just no reason to hold on. There's no reason to cling to it.

In our daily life—here too, but even more in our daily life outside of here, especially in this country—we're bombarded, just bombarded with sensory objects, with the possibility of pleasant sense experience. There's so much stimulation. It's like we're in a whirlwind, just moving from one sense experience to the next to the next. And because we can always move on to another object of clinging, to another pleasant sense object, it hides the fact that the search itself for the pleasant is what brings suffering.

We can feel bored or a little restless one night and decide to watch TV, and what's on starts to feel uncomfortable. So we change the channel, and then we go get ice cream, and then we try a different chair. Then we think of calling up a friend. And then we say, well, maybe I'll read the newspaper. Maybe I'll go out and get a video.

It's just endless. There's always some new object that we can move to.

One of the great things about a retreat environment is that it's so stripped away. Our sense pleasures are so much more restricted. But we can still do the same thing. You see, the mind's movement shifts from wanting to get a new Saab to hoping you can get two apples at tea time. But it's the same movement of mind. And we can often find ourselves doing the exact same thing. "Well, let me sit on this zafu. Maybe if I get a different chair from the dining room. Maybe if I eat in a different configuration. Or if I save this apple and eat it at nine o'clock, then it'll be better than if I eat two apples at five o'clock. And maybe tomorrow at breakfast I'll save the banana and have that at tea time instead of an apple. Maybe I'll have the apple for breakfast and the banana for tea." It's the same movement of mind. Go look in the back dining room there. I don't really need to say anything else. That could just be the talk—just go look in the back dining room.

But we have in a retreat environment what is actually a great opportunity. I know you've really been loving it so far, but it is a great opportunity to experience the process of grasping without being driven to satisfy it. Because sometimes in this restricted environment, you can't. It's the middle of a sitting and this intense desire comes up for that banana you've been saving for seven days. But you're not going to get up because it's the middle of a sitting, and so you just sit there and let mindfulness turn to the process of grasping. It's an incredibly powerful thing. You can experience grasping itself without the immediate gratification of it. And yes, it's unbalancing and it's unpleasant and it feels really yucky, and that's all okay.

In the ability to do this over and over, we find that we're not so driven in our life to do anything just to avoid feeling that grasping. We don't have to spend the rest of our life just going for a new sound, a new smell, a new taste in order not to feel grasping. We really come to understand what it is and not be driven by it.

And this is the seeing that leads to detachment. Detachment meaning the ability to meet the contact, to be with sense objects with even-mindedness, with equanimity—not fearing them and not lusting after them. The equanimity, dispassion. And the Buddha said, through dispassion, one is freed.

The second area of grasping is at views. This is one of my favorites, probably because I do it a lot. It's the tendency of mind that leads one to think, "This alone is true, everything else is false." A very pervasive tendency of mind. And it's binding again, because to hold to any view—any view of the world, of who we are, of anything—limits our world. It limits our possibilities of what we can experience, of what we can perceive, because we tend to accept in our experience only the facts that accord with what our view is. And it can be quite insidious. We only take in the perceptions that corroborate our views and deny anything else.

You see this very clearly in politicians' debates. When the presidential debates are on, you can see that the rhetoric of each participant already reflects what their view is. They already know what they think. And anything they say is just to support that, and nothing can come in from the other person that could in any way be contrary to what they already think. And to me this is why debate is never like two real people talking to each other, because there's no way that either of them is willing to be shaken in the view that they have. And so there can't be any kind of real communication.

It's interesting because having a fixed view of anything, of who we are, can often provide us with a real sense of security, sense of safety, sense of belonging. "Well, this is what Buddhism thinks and this is the Buddhist view of things and I'm a Buddhist so this is what I believe." And it's safe. But it can be scary when anything comes along that doesn't fit with that. It shakes us. It rocks our safe, secure little view of the world. And when we're not aware of views as views, but we're taking them to be a representation of reality, then we just block out whatever doesn't fit.

It was in a book. I didn't read it, but someone told it to me—a story that is a good example of this. It was about a man who was traveling, I think in the mountains of Spain, though I'm not certain. He ran into a

little girl who was two or three years old, and she had a tennis ball, a complete tennis ball. She held it out and showed it to him, and then somehow she turned it inside out and then turned it right side out again. He looked at it carefully—it didn't have any splits in it or anything.

Now, my mind immediately dismisses that story. That's impossible, you know. But he said this really happened. And he went back again some years later, same little girl, but she couldn't do it anymore because everyone had told her it was impossible.

Whether it's true or not, just the fact that one's mind tends to go, "That's ridiculous, that's a ridiculous story—obviously the man was misperceiving the first time and the second time, that's how it was." And that's what we do. We make everything fit the views we already have. When we're doing that, we're closed to the possibility of anything other arising in our experience other than what we already know.

This goes on all the time—here in the retreat, in our daily life. How often do we form and adhere to views through the day? "Oh, this is a good sitting. This is what a good sitting is supposed to be like. This is what it means to be concentrated. This is how practice is supposed to go when it's going right."

And we get so caught up in not recognizing it as a view. If we recognize it as a view, it's fine—it's a view, we don't have to identify with it. But when we don't recognize it as a view, we end up comparing it, this view of how it should be, with our experience now. We get locked into trying to recreate that particular view we have of how things should be.

And so other things that are totally unimaginable and not previously experienced are either kept from coming up, or they're discounted, or they're not given attention. They have no chance to arise because we're forcing the mind to try to perceive or try to have experience according to what preconceived ideas we already have. We're locked in, trapped in our views.

How many ideas just of good practice have come up in the mind during retreat? And how many of them have we recognized as views, and how many have we identified with?

The Buddha said, "Because you are obsessed with preconceived notions, you are holding fast." He talked a lot about not holding on to views. In many of the suttas, people would come to the Buddha as one of many spiritual teachers in India at that time. These teachers used to argue and quarrel all the time, and many people would come to the Buddha with questions about all these various worldviews, wanting to know which was right and which was wrong.

He would always refuse to be associated with any view whatsoever, saying that holding to any opinion or belief brings conflict, brings contention. He said something to the effect that people with views just go around annoying one another. And he stayed completely clear of that.

Holding views brings you into conflict with other people. They go around annoying one another—"This is how it is," and anyone who doesn't agree, you're in a fight. We can see how many of the wars today come

from exactly this.

And holding a view can also bring us into conflict with ourselves. That's what happens here so often. How often do you have a particular experience in your practice, and immediately, before the experience is even over, you've formulated an explanation of what it means, you've formulated a view about it? "Now this is good concentration. I'm doing well. I'm not having many emotions now."

I must be suppressing. I'm having too many emotions. I'm obviously not staying on top of the mindfulness. The practice isn't going well. My sensations are getting vaguer. I must be doing something wrong. The sensations are way too intense, and I've heard that they're supposed to get more subtle. I must be doing something wrong. And on and on and on.

You see, once we've formulated that view, not recognized it, and identified with it, then we're immediately in conflict with what's actually happening in our experience, which is different from this view we have of what *should* be happening. And sometimes, when we're locked in a view, we won't accept perceptions that arise even in our own direct experience that counteract that view. We just think, "That didn't even happen." Lock it away. It is scary sometimes.

There's sometimes a fear of not having any views, not having any explanations of the world, of practice, of what should happen, of where it's going—nothing to identify with. To just be in the moment without any constructions or explanations around it, and open into the unknown of the next moment without anything to compare it against, nothing to be reassured by—"Oh, this is how it should go." It's scary. And it's really freeing.

The Buddha again: "One who is freed does not concur and does not dispute with anyone. She or he employs the speech currently used in the world without misapprehending it"—in other words, without misunderstanding it.

So in relation to views, our practice is simply to know when a view has arisen and to see it as a view. To know when there's grasping in the mind in regard to it and when there's not. Some views are quite helpful as ways of explaining, as ways of communicating. And when we see them for what they are—as a view—and don't identify, we're not trapped by them. We're not limited by them. We can use the way of seeing, "the speech currently used in the world," without misunderstanding it to be an accurate description of the way things are. Any view is limiting when identified with. And this applies to views about enlightenment, about truth. You know that line from the Third Zen Patriarch: "Do not search for the truth. Only cease to cherish opinions."

So that's the first two forms of grasping—to sense pleasures and to views. The last two I'll just mention briefly.

The third one is grasping to rites and rituals. It's described by Ledi Sayadaw as the fixed view that a person is able to purify oneself or free oneself from suffering by means of external, outward rules and

rituals. In other words, one way of describing it is having the idea that one can make oneself perfect by grasping at some kind of outer behavior to do so.

For example, thinking that just the outer behavior would free one. If you come in here and sit, and no investigation is going on, no sense of really looking and being with reality as it is in the moment, but you're just going through the outer form—you sit and you walk and there's no interest, no effort, no engagement. You're listening to a cassette of Stevie Wonder the whole time, and you think, "Well, if I just do this, if I sit and walk, then I'm going to be freed from suffering." That would be a kind of grasping at outer rules and rituals. It's different from committed investigation, in whatever form that takes, of the nature of our experience, of the nature of mind and body.

This doesn't mean that we necessarily have to discard method or technique. Obviously, these are incredibly helpful, valuable tools. We use the method to investigate the nature of our mind and body, of this moment, of our experience. But we don't mistake blind, unthinking use of method and technique for the truth. The Buddha said we need a raft to get across the river, but then once we're across the river, we don't keep carrying the raft on our back. Or in the Zen parable: don't mistake the finger pointing at the moon for the moon itself.

So that's grasping at rites and rituals—outer behavior to free us from suffering.

And the fourth, which is a biggie and we've talked about quite a bit already, is grasping at the self-idea. This is the big one underlying all of it. The self-idea. To consider the ever-changing world in the light of a permanent, unchanging essence. In other words, it's this latent, underlying tendency to identify with any experience whatsoever. Any experience. Doesn't matter what. Again, you can see how this happens over and over and over, just as we're sitting here. It's what I described before: when there's contact, it's unpleasant, it's a sound, it's unpleasant, aversion arises, and that's grasped onto.

In that moment, watch and see when that grasping happens how the sense of self arises at that same time. And so in this process of isolating and grasping onto the sound, as the grasping strengthens, so also does the identification with that experience as "me." There's aversion, it leads into anger, it becomes *my* anger—leading into self-condemnation or self-justification, thoughts about the person or whatever is making the sound. See how solid that self-sense becomes through the process of grasping.

And then notice other times when there's a very similar experience arising, a similar contact, and the grasping just doesn't really happen. There can be sound and unpleasantness and aversion, and it's all seen, and it just kind of fades away. There's not this strong sense of "I" that comes up with it.

So really watching through the process of grasping and identification with experience, we can see how the sense of self arises and how it dissolves. Notice times when there's not grasping and the self is not present. It's not a solid, unchanging sense of self. It's arising and passing when the conditions are there.

All identification, all grasping, blinds us. It's bondage. It blinds us to what is true, blinds us to the

perfection of this moment.

And so our practice is not to condemn the process of grasping. It's merely an impersonal process. It's not to condemn ourselves because we're not free from it, but simply to come to know it clearly for what it is—how grasping arises, how it comes to be. Watch how it dissolves. Learning not to be so blinded by the delight in it.

And through this seeing, through this mindfulness of this process, the power of grasping does begin to weaken. This mindfulness of the process allows for understanding rather than just acting from blind reactivity—real understanding, clear discernment of what's appropriate. And through understanding, deeper and deeper understanding, it is possible for this seemingly endless search for gratification to come to an end.

The Buddha taught: Because they understand their sense activity, the stillness fills them with delight. They see just what contact does, and so their craving ends. They realize the total calm—through seeing and understanding.

And every moment of our experience here gives us a chance to deepen that.

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