Grasping

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:02:15

The Buddha often said, when being really simple, that what he taught was suffering and the end of suffering.

A lot of what each of you is doing, in your own unique way, what you're confronting day to day, moment to moment, is your own particular flavor of suffering. Whatever the particular story, the physical and psychological components, more or less intense—it takes a great deal of ongoing courage and commitment to do what each one of you is doing here, in whatever form that happens to be taking.

Of course, luckily, the point of confronting our suffering is that by truly understanding it, seeing it for what it is, understanding through that open seeing how the suffering and confusion arises, is created, is maintained moment to moment—in the power of this understanding, of this knowing itself, that's sufficient to open us to the end of suffering. It's not like we're here with a shovel trying to dig up every moment of defilement or suffering until we finally get it all and there's this big hole of emptiness. Sometimes it seems like that.

Whatever the particular variety of manifestation—and part of how we get caught up is by looking at our own uniqueness in it—underneath how it manifests in your own experience, there are some really basic core principles, one of which I want to talk about tonight. One of the most core causes of our suffering, of our confusion, moment to moment, is the experience of attachment. Big surprise.

Tonight I want to talk about it not as a bad thing, not as another means to engender self-loathing, but as a way to actually get fascinated in the process of clinging, of attachment itself. Because through that willingness to explore it without hating it can come about the deep understanding that lets us let go of it altogether and open again to our original nature of peace.

It's really poignant in a way. The Buddha also said, early on before he began teaching, that one of the things that moved him to compassion was seeing how everybody deeply wants to be happy. We can see this if we look around, if we tune into ourselves. But in our confusion, in our not understanding what is so, the things that we do to try to make ourselves happy are the very things that keep us spinning in suffering and confusion. And the harder we try to be happy, the more we get lost in this suffering. It's very poignant.

This is really why exploring the field of clinging, of grasping, can be so important, because that is one of the key places where we get lost in this confusion.

The Buddha said, "The truth is profound and hard to discover. You can't attain it by thinking about it—but

for the wise to experience. But this generation relies on attachment, relishes attachment, delights in attachment. So it's hard for them to see the truth."

Well, we haven't changed much in 2500 years.

I hope tonight we can together have a sort of experiential exploration of the nature of clinging, of attachment, as it arises in our experience. Just to begin to explore it without fear of it. How it affects us. How it distorts and hides the truth.

We've talked a lot about craving—the mind inclining towards something pleasant, or when there's something unpleasant, inclining towards something pleasant to get away from that. Clinging or grasping is simply the next step of really grabbing hold. It's given in the commentaries the simile that if craving is the mind groping in the dark to steal something, grasping or clinging is actually grabbing it and stealing it. It's just a strengthening of mind moments into a real holding on to something.

And it has this quality of blinding, of thirst. We're not talking about when you're hungry and you know you need to eat and you go to eat—a very neutral, straightforward activity. We're not talking about that kind of desire. We're not talking about the aspiration for freedom or the aspiration to help all beings that's coming from not a blinding, distorted place, but a real sense of motivation. We are talking about that blinding, driven quality of grasping or attachment. And I'm sure you can all tell the difference in your experience when it arises.

So how does it arise? On the basic level of experience, whatever of the six sense doors—this is one of the ways the Buddha talks about our whole life experience—is simply the six sense experiences, six sense contacts arising one after the other, after the other. And that's all. Seeing, hearing, thinking, emotion, tasting, smelling, just happening, coming, going, coming, going. And suddenly one of them is like—stopped. And it might just be a moment of craving.

Oh, that's pleasant. Without the mindfulness, without noticing it, as we know, it just kind of hardens into grasping. There's no wisdom there. The grasping gets more solid. Each moment of it makes it easier for the next moment of grasping to arise. And it gives rise to all kinds of thoughts and actions and sense of self and the whole picture.

Just walking outside back and forth, minding your own business, and suddenly this thought arises: "Ah, a walk around the lake would be nice." Just a thought coming and going. But there's that mind inclining towards it. And the next time it comes up: "It really would be nice." It inclines a little more. The third time it comes up, there's no more sense of spaciousness or peace. It's like, "Yes, I must walk around the lake right now. I'll never be happy again." And we go, or we don't. But that quality—that's how the grasping arises.

That's a simple example. Obviously sometimes it's so complicated that we can't even see where the point of contact was that triggered it. But no matter how complex, each moment of grasping or attachment

begins at that point of contact, which is one of the things we can begin to recognize when we have the silence and the mindfulness being developed over a long retreat. Teasing something out of a complicated experience to the point of contact can be quite difficult in our daily life. Here is the unique laboratory to explore that.

This is the Buddha again: "For some people contact, the point where sense plus object meets, 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 is, and so their craving ends. They realize the total calm."

I love that. It doesn't say you get rid of anything. It says you simply see just what contact is, what it does. And in that seeing, the craving ends. It fills one with delight, that sense of calm—the calm of the mind that's free from clinging, that's free from pushing away, that simply is resting in things the way they are. It's wonderful. It's exquisite.

And we all experience moments of that over and over on this retreat. Notice them. And we experience lots of moments that aren't that, over and over. Notice them. That's what we are cultivating the mindfulness to help us understand: just what's going on. Understand our sense activity. Inquire into the nature of clinging, of grasping itself, when that is what's arising. It's a key way to again recognize what is true.

Krishnamurti said that unless the ways of desire are understood, illusion is inevitable. Inevitable, because, as Nisargadatta goes on to say, the obstacles to the clear perception of our true being are desire for pleasure and fear of pain.

So this is a great laboratory. Not to hate clinging—"Oh, I hate it, here it is, and it's my obstacle to my clear perception of my true being now." That doesn't help; it really doesn't do it. But we can begin to inquire into it whenever it arises, to begin to understand how it functions to blind us to what is true. How it functions to cloud our knowing of that stillness.

So play with it when you're sitting, when you're walking. Just as I was saying before, you sit, things come and go. This is my big insight for the week. It's a little embarrassing that this is it for the whole week, but I was looking at a mail order catalog yesterday, and I kind of got it: "Oh, it's just like a sitting." Looking at a mail order catalog is exactly the same as being in a sitting and kind of watching reactions of mind arise. The things come and go. There's a sight, a sound, a thought, an image.

Or I was turning the pages. There wasn't anything particular I was looking for, just being there—oh, this, this, this. And suddenly something arises, and the little pincers come out. *Ah, that.*

Notice in your sitting: what does it feel like? Things are just flowing—big things, little things, emotions, thoughts, wisps, the breath, it doesn't matter what. And suddenly something stops the flow. There's that feeling of *this*. Feel it in your body. Feel it in your mind. Really recognize what it's like. I know for me it's

really as if internally I went like that—if it's a bigger thing. If it's really subtle little thoughts that you hardly notice, I was noticing just this little pincer in my mind going, *eh, eh, eh*. Notice how that works, and keep paying attention to the function of that grasping as it's still present.

So for example, you're standing in the food line. Just present, standing, seeing what's for the meal, and that's fine—just seeing and hearing and thinking, and judgments come and judgments go, but there's no real charge. And suddenly the perception comes up: *Oh, there's only six more muffins, and I'm kind of far back. What if that person takes two? What if I don't...* Around the idea of muffin, around those thoughts, it gets stronger and stronger and stronger.

First, looking at the clinging itself: what's the effect it has on the whole experience? What had been a sense of presence, coming and going, spaciousness, connectedness—*isn't this nice, we're all here together in this one beautiful retreat*—suddenly everyone in front of us is an obstacle, the enemy, in the way. There certainly is such a strong sense of self and other that comes up almost immediately with that movement of grasping. The grasping could be just a simple wisp of a thought, but the sense of self gets really hardened very quickly in that moment.

Clinging has the effect of giving us what you might call tunnel vision. We get really focused on the object clung to, the object desired, and other things—such as the people in the way—are just ignored or seen as something else. Really a sense of separation. And clearly there's no sense of peace or stillness in that moment. It really distorts both our ability to be open and appreciative of whatever else might be happening, and it also can distort our perception of the thing that we want. There's a saying in India that if a pickpocket meets a saint, the pickpocket only sees the saint's pockets.

So clinging is this tunnel vision, and it blinds us. This is really how it works—to blind us to the possibility in that moment of recognizing our innate completeness. What do you mean, innate completeness? I won't be complete unless I get that muffin. Then everything will be okay. I mean, why don't we get it? I don't know why we don't get it, but over and over—the muffin, a new car, a better relationship, it doesn't matter what it is—it's that same movement. It's not the lack of muffin or a car that is hiding the radiance of the sun of our innate purity. But it is that movement of clinging that completely blinds us. It keeps us looking in the wrong direction.

So on the ultimate level, you could say—well, on both levels, both ultimate and the kind of relative *we're-separate-people-and-let's-keep-it-that-way* level of reality—Sayadaw U Pandita said once that there are two ways a moment of ignorance manifests in our experience. When ignorance is present—it's also something that comes and goes, a rising mental state—it has two functions. One is that we don't truly see what is here, what is present. So we don't recognize the stillness. And the second manifestation of ignorance is that we misconstruct what we do see. We misperceive what we do see and see what's not here—such as this incredible muffin that's going to make everything okay.

That also works on the relative level. And when we don't see what's going on, as you may have noticed, we

can go to amazing lengths—all kinds of thoughts and activities and energy expended in order to gratify some particular craving—because we're not really seeing what goes on. We're seeing things as they're not.

Well, some of you have heard this story, but I'll tell it for the ones that haven't, because it's a perfect example of this—something that we all do so much of the time by not seeing how the grasping in the mind distorts our perceptions of reality.

So I was teaching in Yucca Valley some years ago, and it was a beautiful, warm, sunny afternoon between sittings. I was sitting and talking with my friend, one of the other teachers, and another friend who had come to visit. Just peaceful, things were lovely, very spacious—we were talking, present.

And suddenly, this other person who was visiting started talking about how they had just been to a new place down the road and had this great milkshake. And that was the particular experience that my mind just grabbed onto, totally unmindfully. I looked at my friend—not the one who said this—and it was kind of like this immediate, *yeah, let's go get one*.

From then on, no appreciation anymore of that situation in the moment. No more appreciation of being with this other person who had come to visit. It was like, we've got half an hour until the next sitting—let's end this conversation right now and get going. And that's basically what we did.

We jumped in the car, drove down the road to this place, which had—I'm not exaggerating—closed ten minutes previously. So that should have been enough, but it wasn't, because when you don't really see the strength of grasping, it just strengthens into the next thing, and the next. You do really stupid things.

So we said, well, where could we get a milkshake? I mean, we knew this strip of road. We go there every year. And we only had now fifteen minutes to get back to the next sitting, which one of us had to lead.

So we go flying—I was driving, flying down the road, looking for somewhere to get a milkshake. Just kind of madly reading the signs on the side. And my friend says, "Oh, over there—yogurt café, yogurt café!" And I looked over. It said *urgent care*.

That's what we do. And even that didn't stop us.

The thing is, we're doing that all the time. All the time. The lengths we go to, the activity we get involved in to satisfy some craving. Do you think—oh, we never did get a milkshake—do you think it would have made us really happy? No, we would have gotten it, slogged it down, and whizzed back into the sitting because we were late. It was just a little episode of craziness.

As one of my friends says, "Stop this slavish behavior." That's what we're doing. We're enthralled to the idea that if we can end this feeling of craving, we will have peace. That's true. That is true. And we had peace before the feeling of craving arose.

All we have to do is simply notice that that clinging itself is another arising appearance. It doesn't have to

drive us. A lot of the times it will—don't be setting up some expectations, like, "Ah, just see craving, la-di-da." A lot of the times it will drive us. But simply, if we can relate to it as another arising appearance, explore it, feel it, notice how it comes, just stay there with it—and you know what happens? It goes. It vanishes. At some point it vanishes, it dissipates.

And again, in that moment, notice the potential for wakefulness, the potential for freedom, for peace, in that moment of the clinging's vanishing. Whether or not you obtained what the clinging was about is irrelevant. And that's what's so hard for us to believe. That's where we get so seduced.

As one of my friends said when I told him this milkshake story, "Well, I get it, but the thing is—when do we get to drink the milkshake?"

This leads into the four areas of grasping, of clinging, talked about in some of the commentaries: the area of sense desire, clinging to views and opinions, clinging to rites and rituals or making oneself perfect, and of course, the big one—the sense of self.

So this "when do we get to have the milkshake" leads right into the first of these areas—the clinging to, the grasping at sense pleasures.

It's very interesting because often we'll hear or think, "Okay, it means I can never have the milkshake. It means the only way to be free from clinging is never again to act on clinging, never satisfy it, and that way I'll be free from it." Now, there is a lot to be said for renunciation because it does give us the opportunity to see that the peace is not dependent on getting what we want. But it's also possible to renounce out of self-hatred, out of fear, out of grim negativity. That's not what we're talking about. So there's a balance.

I want to talk a little bit about this area of clinging to sense pleasures. One definition of sense desire comes from a Burmese meditation master of the last century, Ledi Sayadaw, defining sense desire as implying laying a firm hold onto something and the inability to shake it off even after experiencing great pain due to it and perceiving its many harmful consequences.

And doesn't it feel like that sometimes? It's like, "I don't want to want this. It's killing me." But still the clinging can be so strong.

Sense desire is a very seductive aspect of our experience, and certainly in our culture it's overwhelming. We have just a barrage of possibility to satisfy sense desire. The Buddha spoke about the dangers of sense desire in incredibly strong terms. I just want to give you a couple of milder examples. He's talking about the danger of indulging, of being obsessed by sense pleasures: They're like a skeleton, bare bones thrown to a hungry dog that do nothing to appease its hunger. They're like a burning torch—its flame might burn the hand of the person holding it if the wind shifts suddenly. Sense pleasures are like a dream, short-lived and not real. Sense pleasures are borrowed possessions; they do not belong to us and we do not hold on to them.

Those last two really seem true. I'm leaving out the stronger examples—really, really strong teachings about the dangers of getting lost in clinging to sense desire, to the desire for sense pleasure.

We know it doesn't work, that trying to make ourselves happy through more sense pleasures is like trying to quench our thirst with salt water. Theoretically we know it, but if we really look at our behavior, much of the time what is the underlying understanding? I'll speak for myself. The underlying behavior I often seem to be acting from is that somehow some sense experience over there is going to fulfill my sense of need for inner completion. And I don't quite notice that's what's going on. We don't get it. That's the danger.

And in our society, even here, with so much stripped away—and it's really a true renunciation, spending three months like this—even here there's an endless potential to gratify sense desire. Whether it's the meals, or just thinking about the meals, fantasizing, writing a letter, going to look for mail, looking at the bulletin board, taking a walk (which can be skillful, but can also just be wanting some pleasure), having a cup of tea, washing your socks. One thing after the other can be for many different reasons. But if you look, how often is the motivation, the intention, coming out of some feeling that clinging to something pleasant is going to make me happy?

I noticed we just don't get it. When something happens and we feel a little peaceful—or we don't—rather than stopping and noticing the process, we simply move on to grasping after the next sense pleasure. When we get it or we don't, we're frustrated or we're happy, either way that particular grasping ends, and the next moment another one comes up. And we just keep moving to the next, to the next, to the next. In our life, of course, it's endless how much we can move on. And moving on can so easily hide the fact that it's the search itself, it's that grasping in the mind itself that's bringing the sense of incompleteness, that's bringing the sense of suffering.

But we forget. We get so focused on the thing grasped, whatever the sense pleasure is, even just a fantasy in the mind. There's a saying that desire puts feathers on the object desired, makes it more attractive, and then we really go after it. When we stop and look at the process, we're kind of brought up short—which is why we don't like to stop and look. We keep going.

I noticed last year when I was sitting during this course, at one point it just really dawned on me—it was around lunch—how, not that I was craving lunch all morning, but so often thoughts would come up: "Oh, lunch will be in a couple hours. That'll be nice." Not intense craving, but it's subtle.

It doesn't always have to be intense. But over and over, that leaning into turns into a grasping. *Oh, lunch. Lunch will be the high point. Lunch will be pleasant. This will be the sense hit for the day.* I mean, the mind didn't say it that clearly. And one day I really noticed. Lunch came. What actually happens at lunch? Notice how many moments are actually this pleasant sense experience and how much are judgments and waiting and just chewing and the tedium of lifting and placing and lifting and placing. *Oh, that's a nice flavor.* Wanting more. Just really notice it. And then all of a sudden, fifteen minutes, twenty minutes, it's

over. It wasn't what we'd imagined.

But does the mind really look at that? It goes, *Oh, well, four and a half more hours, there'll be tea.* And even after a month of peanut butter and crackers every day, my mind was saying, *Oh, peanut butter—four and a half hours.*

Another seductive aspect of this serial craving, so to speak, or serial clinging, is that unlooked at, it's as if in the experience of clinging itself—clinging to sense pleasure, going for the next one, the next one—there can be almost as if the clinging itself is its own sort of intensity, even a kind of pleasure or delight. If you really look, it isn't. But unlooked at, it's almost as if we can get addicted to the clinging itself.

In the movie *Shadowlands*, there was one scene where the C.S. Lewis character was teaching a literature class and talking about the European Middle Ages ideal of chivalric love. He said something to the effect that the most ideal chivalric love is that which can never be obtained—and that's the most exquisite pleasure of love. I was cringing. A lifetime of yearning for that which cannot be obtained. I'm not a scholar of the Middle Ages, so forgive me if I'm getting this philosophy a little wrong; I'm just coming from the movie. But that this could even be thought of as an ideal to be held up—constant yearning that can never be satisfied. What a hell realm.

Well, we do it to ourselves. We might keep changing what we're yearning for, but we can easily get seduced by that sort of intensity. One of my favorite haikus by Bashō is: *Though I'm in Kyoto, when the cuckoo sings, I long for Kyoto.* Just longing, for the sake of longing—almost as if it makes us feel alive. And that's what's so poignant, because the real vitality of life is already here, and the longing only blinds us to it.

It's so wonderful that we have the opportunity now to stop and turn the attention around and really begin to experience that, so we know it for ourselves. The peace we seek is already here. Always. And it's only that grasping, that clinging, that keeps us from seeing it.

I say "only." I don't mean to imply that it's simple. It's incredibly subtle and ingrained, and sense pleasures are actually the easiest of the four areas to notice. It's actually rather obvious. And in fact, the peace of non-grasping—this is in my experience—is a much, much more subtle and quiet type of peace or happiness than I generally, or ever, have experienced in the gratification of sense pleasure. But we're like an intensity-junkie society, so it can be easy to miss that if we're not paying attention.

Not so easy here, because your minds are getting more and more tuned to stillness. You can recognize it more. The kind of gross overabundance of sense desire isn't available to you here. And even though that might seem like suffering moment to moment, in the big picture it's a blessing, because it really will let each of you begin to explore the process itself rather than being so blinded by the possibility for so-called satisfaction.

It's not that we can never have the milkshake—but know what we're doing when we're doing it. And

opening up to paying attention to the seductive quality of clinging, of getting lost in obsession with sense desires, that's not the same thing as developing an aversion for life, or a fear of experiencing pleasant experience because you might get attached. Aversion and fear is not freedom.

It's only aversion and fear. It's not what we're cultivating here.

So the invitation is to really begin to explore the difference between real appreciation of what's true in the moment—which actually is not possible when we're clinging—and clinging itself. The difference between appreciation and clinging. Neither of them is aversion or pushing away.

This is Thich Nhat Hanh: "When we are obsessed by sense pleasures, we lose our freedom. This was taught by the Buddha. But we have 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 can bring about suffering and entanglement both in the present moment and the future for ourselves and others. But the joy and happiness of a peaceful mind bring neither suffering nor attachment in the present or in the future for ourselves or others."

The peace and happiness of mindfulness, of an open mind. The joy of a peaceful mind brings neither suffering nor attachment. Explore that.

When you look at the sunset, there can be just a moment of pure appreciation, of joy. That's possible because we know how things really are. You know the sun's going to go down—no two ways about it. And we don't stand there trying to wish it wouldn't happen. And so there's no clinging, and there's the possibility of just pure presence. It's lovely. And we don't weep with sorrow that the sun's gone.

Notice when that moment changes to a moment of clinging. You might actually not weep that the sun's down, but there's just a little "oh, that was so nice." We're clinging to pleasant experience just in that moment. Not the sun, but wanting that pleasant feeling. Notice the difference.

Or like I said the other day, I was looking at the leaves with that same appreciation, and suddenly it changes to clinging. It's nice. We want it to last longer. We want to hold on to it somehow. Notice that as soon as that clinging comes up, the peace is gone. The spaciousness is gone. The sense of interconnectedness is gone. It's like I somehow separate from these colors and these leaves, and I have to grab them all and hold onto them somehow.

Notice. Just notice the shift. That's all. That's all we have to do. And those moments of clear presence, that stillness of seeing just what contact is—notice that too. Just let it be, but really let that peace, that quality, begin to sink in, to counteract our unconscious ideas of the intensity of pleasure we can get from sense pleasures.

So that's the first field of grasping.

The second one, which I find very interesting, is clinging or grasping to views and opinions. This is defined

as thinking, the tendency of the mind to think, "This alone is true; everything else is false." At least that's easy enough to see if the mind would actually consciously think that. Then you'd have the awareness—view, view coming up—and that would help a lot, because at least you'd know what it is you're clinging to.

Clearly, views that are clung to limit the possibility of what we can experience. They divide the world, create conflict. Because what tends to happen is when we're holding fast to some view, we tend to perceive or accept only the facts that corroborate that view and sort of ignore the perceptions that don't fit in.

We can see this quite clearly in the world if you look at various areas of conflict—religious wars, all the weird things that go on, really horrible things that, if we're not involved, we can look and say, "Oh yes, that's so clearly clinging to views," which complicates and leads to war.

For example, Northern Ireland. To an outside observer like myself, the Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland seem really very similar to one another—much closer to each other than I am to any of them. But the view can create such hatred and fear and division. Or the view in this country on abortion, pro or con, leading to people actually murdering one another over that particular view. Such a holding to "this is right, this is the only way."

I just heard on the news tonight that some academics at Cornell University had invited some intellectuals from Cuba, from Castro's Cuba, to come and speak. And so the people at Cornell who'd invited these intellectuals received death threats from anti-Castro Cubans in Miami.

Death threats, because they invited someone to come and speak at the college who held a different view. This is the power of holding to views and opinions.

And it's, as I said, easy to see from the outside. But what about when you really believe it, that it's true? Whatever it might happen to be—whether it's politics, whether it's medical, whether it's gay rights, whether it's abortion, whether it's your view in a family argument, your view of who you are. When I feel I'm really right, I know I'm right, how open am I to really hear the possibility that maybe the other person's right? And what about when you both really know you're right, but somehow you have opposite ideas of what's right? Have you ever had an argument like that in a relationship? I know what happened. No, you don't. This is what happened. And you both are positive that you're right. It doesn't make for a lot of free play of "okay, let's hear your opinion." This is how it is. That's what views do. And when our deeply clung to view is threatened, it brings up such anger, if not fear. It's as if our whole life is threatened. And on some level, our whole understanding of life is threatened in that moment.

In Vietnam, during the Vietnamese War, when Thich Nhat Hanh and Sister Phong were simply trying to help people who were hurt by the war without taking sides or adhering to either side's view, that was so threatening to both sides that held the view. It's like it's more undermining almost than the obvious

enemy. And they would kill the people in the School for Social Work who were only trying to rebuild villages or educate children, because of the deep unsettledness of having your views not accepted, of having them challenged.

So at least we can work with this when we recognize it's a view. What about when we don't?

A friend told me a story—this is kind of a light story so I like it—of a Tibetan Lama who was giving a long talk to Westerners, talking about the pure land, another higher realm, a higher plane of existence where a future Buddha is residing and giving talks and teaching the Dharma to other celestial beings. He was going on and on, describing this realm the same as you would describe this room here, in that amount of detail, that amount of precision. And the Westerners were clearly getting more and more restive—yeah, sure. At one point he just looked at them and said, "You might not believe me, but I've been there."

Do we even let it in? Or does the mind go, yeah, sure.

On the level of our own day-to-day experience, never mind opinions about politics or anything else, this is what we're doing moment-to-moment, day-to-day: constructing views out of our own particular experience, clinging to them, and then judging everything else or comparing by that view. And just not letting in perceptions that don't fit. That's where we get really blinded.

An example. One summer, quite some years ago, I spent the summer in England with someone I was in a relationship with. It was a new relationship, and we were staying in this really exquisitely beautiful place in England—a little cottage boathouse right on the river in Devon, on this beautiful estate. I had been there many times before, and I had many friends there. It was like the most idyllic setting you could imagine. So unknown to myself, I had formed the view: well, of course I must be happy. You couldn't possibly not be happy in a situation like this. The relationship was terrible, but because I had decided I couldn't not be happy, I didn't even let that in. The whole summer was like that. I left. We broke up the day after I left. Clearly, it wasn't like this idyllic summer. I still never let that in the whole time I was there.

I didn't realize it until the next summer when I was back again in the same place, visiting friends, and I was walking through a field. I remember this so clearly. At this point I didn't have any particular view to protect. I was just walking through the field, quite open and present. And you know how sometimes your body will have a bodily memory of a time? I wasn't thinking about the year before. I just walked through this field I'd walked through many times the year before, and the bodily memory of how I'd felt came up. I just felt that. Oh. Oh, that's how I felt? I must have been miserable. That's really unhappy. I never let that in to my conscious experience because it didn't fit the view I held.

We do that a lot.

Probably that happens to you once or twice here in a day. A rich time for this is the question period in the morning. People hear a question, and without even realizing it, they think: "That person's hardly having any emotions, and I'm having so much. It must be that the way not to have emotions is right practice, and

mine isn't." Immediately we start comparing and judging. Or just the reverse—the person with no emotions hears another person say they're having all these experiences, and they think, "Oh my God, I'm suppressing. I'm supposed to be having these huge emotional releases, and I'm not. This is how the practice is supposed to be."

Or people who are a lot with the breath hear someone else talking about many different experiences and think, "Oh, my practice is so boring, it's not really moving, it's not really free-flowing mindfulness." And the reverse happens too. Then we take experiences just in our own internal life and think, "Ah, now I see what mindfulness is." I watch my mind do this all the time. "Oh, I thought it was that, but I see that was a view that was wrong. This is how it is." And immediately another view is formed. It's fascinating, if we can notice that. If you don't, you find yourself comparing, judging, expecting. See if you can pull back and say, "What's the opinion here? What's the view? What's being clung to in this moment?"

In a way, I'm going to the fourth field now—the biggest, but also the most subtle. The view that we cling to most deeply is that of a separate, solid, unchanging self. By not realizing that it's a view, we think that's just how it is. Even if intellectually we can all say, "Oh no, I know, that's one of the main teachings—anattā—that's not so, it's all transparent, we're all interconnected." That's nice talk, but what do we really cling to unconsciously as the view, as the way of being? And then we don't let in perceptions that don't match that.

For example, that of impermanence. When we really look, really feel sensations in the body, there is nothing permanent there. But it's hard to let that in. It's kind of, "Oh yeah, that's interesting, but..." And then there's the image of the solid body, or the memory of myself since I was five, or whatever particular way that view arises in that moment—that sense of clinging to self.

This is, of course, extremely subtle—all the different aspects of experience that arise in a moment and that are clung to as a sense of self. Simply, again, beginning to notice it. Don't think you're going to just eradicate it, but notice. The clinging to any experience itself—it can be clinging to a physical image, it can be to a sense of personality, to a particular emotion, to the experience of knowing, of consciousness, clinging to intention. They're coming and going, coming and going. A particular experience arises and there's that contraction, that identification, that sense of self arising around it. Just notice it. That's all. And notice that it keeps changing. Just begin to let in the possibility of perceiving things in a different way.

We'll talk more—this is a huge topic, I'm only just touching on it—but it's the fourth area of grasping, this subtle sense of self. When you notice it, see if you can feel that grasping, how out of the spaciousness, the clarity, there's suddenly—it might be a huge grasping or it might be just ever so subtle—just, "I'm clear." Or, "This clarity is nice. This is how it should be. I wonder when it'll go away." However it arises, just notice that subtle movement and notice the effect of it: that in that moment there's me and other, and it seems solid. But we don't need to accept that just because it seems solid, it is. That's how we fall back on views.

It's scary not to have views. It's scary not to rest with some solid sense of self. Can we imagine living without clinging or resting in any particular view? People sometimes get actually quite angry to hear about that or think about that. How can we live without views? How can we vote? How can we take part in things?

No one's saying we don't have opinions. We're talking about the clinging to them as if they are the truth—a clinging that doesn't let in another possibility. The Buddha often said that people who cling to views go about in the world annoying one another.

Thich Nhat Hanh again: "Because we human beings are afraid of nothingness, we cling to the belief in a permanent, indestructible self."

The Buddha said—or asked, really—is there any view of self in which you can take refuge that will not cause anxiety, exhaustion, sorrow, suffering, and despair? Of course, they all answered, "No, Reverend Teacher." But look for yourself. Can you find any view of self that you can take refuge in that does not lead to anxiety, sorrow, suffering, despair, exhaustion? Just keep looking. Somehow this fear comes up about letting go of that clinging, but it's just the same as the clinging we spoke of earlier. It's the clinging itself that's creating the suffering, that's keeping us bound, that's keeping us from simply stepping back and seeing: it is perfectly complete here and now, just as it is. There is nothing that needs to be done.

The last area of grasping is any kind of rite or ritual—the idea that some outer form in itself is going to bring me perfection, is going to purify me. Again, it's like looking outward and holding to something external. The Buddha, in the famous parable of the raft, talks about even his own teachings. Incredibly useful as a raft to get across the river to a safe shore. But when you get there, you don't pick the raft up and walk with it on your shoulders for the rest of your life. It's useful. We use it.

So just using this time here, one of the ways to explore how the movement of grasping, of clinging—whether incredibly gross and we're acting out all over the place, or really, really subtle—just that movement out of stillness and knowing, how that obscures the peace of mind, how that obscures the recognition of our own innate completeness and has us looking outside for perfection and for happiness.

I said in one other talk how Nyoshul Khenpo has said that this recognition of our true nature is the great crossroads at which we find ourselves every moment of our lives. Every moment is another chance to recognize, in a moment of just pure being—without grasping, without delusion, without aversion—that innate stillness of peace. Just know when that's how it is. And recognize how the clinging, how the wanting, how we start looking elsewhere for what was always here, and how far and fast that can take us, seemingly. And how the next moment, if you just stand there and be with the craving and be with the clinging—it's okay, I'll explode from clinging—and just see what happens, the next moment it could be gone, and again there's the potential for recognition. It's a great exploration. It's really fascinating.

Let's close with Nisargadatta. He says, "Nothing physical or mental can give you freedom. You are free

once you understand that your bondage is of your own making and you cease forging the chains that bind you. You are free in a moment of recognition."

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