The Way of Non-Clinging (Part 1)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:18:27

What I would like to do tonight is give a talk that in some ways could stand alone, talking about non-clinging. But in other ways—and this is my main purpose, really—hopefully give something that serves as a kind of preface to the set of talks we're going to start around the alchemy of desire, around eros and practice.

So a kind of preface, but a slightly strange preface, one that serves to give a context, or at least part of a context, for what many would probably consider relatively unusual teachings in the rest of the set. I want to give part of a context tonight, and as well as context, begin also to contrast different understandings or visions or conceptual frameworks that we can have of Dharma and of this teaching of clinging and non-clinging in the Dharma.

This is the main point: to begin to contrast something, because we can take away from listening to teachings or reading teachings, or even be given through teachings, an understanding or a conceptual framework of what the Dharma is that shapes our practice and shapes our whole sense of what the Dharma is and what the project is and what awakening is and what we're moving towards and what's involved. An understanding, a conceptual framework that is certainly helpful to a degree for many people, and certainly freeing to a certain extent, again, for many people. But that also shuts doors.

This is the contrast I want to make between different understandings, different conceptual frameworks, one of which—or a group of which—I would say, helpful as it is, freeing as it is to a certain extent, also ends up shutting doors. Doors that open to a much wider and much more radical freedom and beauty and openness of being and of the sense of existence.

So part of the context: begin to contrast some different large-scale understandings and where they might lead or what they might block off. I've talked about all of this before and certainly written about much of it. I don't particularly like to repeat myself—I don't see the point if it's already out there. Generally, I would rather move on to new stuff. So a lot of this will be quite brief.

Much of it is widely available. There's probably not a Dharma teacher alive, and certainly not an insight meditation teacher, who doesn't talk about clinging at certainly one of the levels that I want to talk about. So some of it will be moving through territory quite briefly for those reasons, but I do want to draw out a couple of things, a couple of main points that I've maybe only mentioned before here and there, important as they are, again, for the sake of context and for the sake of contrast.

When we look in the Pali Canon, the collected teachings of the early teachings, the teachings of the

Buddha, the historical Buddha, we find a lot of different words. Like English, we have passion, desire, craving, greed, clinging, grasping—many words. English is a very rich language. Similarly in Pali, in the language of the Buddha, we have a word like *raga*, which actually means to color or to dye. The coloring, like especially rouge—it's related to the word red, to make rouge. But it really means passion, excitement.

Later on, we'll emphasize this: that passion colors something. When we color things red, we become impassioned, or passion also colors things. So there's a link there. But there's this word *raga*, usually translated as passion or lust.

Kama can have two meanings. One is the object of sensual enjoyment—the object, so something sensually pleasing—but also sense desire. The verb *kamati* means to desire or to crave.

There's the word *lobha*, which can be translated as greed. *Geda*, also translated as greed.

There's a word *chanda*, which is an interesting word, because sometimes you can talk about *chanda*, for example, in Pali called *hitachanda*, as the effort to do good. *Hitta* is what's useful or suitable or beneficial or friendly. So when we talk, for example, in metta practice about well-wishing or doing good in the world, it's *hitachanda*. *Chanda* is really impulse or intention or will. It could be virtuous or it could be a vice. The motivation to accomplish—it means all that. It can also mean excitement, related to impulse there.

Sometimes people want to make a distinction: *chanda* is positive because it's good, good intention, or it can be good. And words like *raga*, *kama*, *lobha*, etc., these are negative words. They lead to suffering. They are unskillful, etc.

However, there are also plenty of instances in the Pali Canon where, for instance, Sariputta in the Samyutta Nikaya says, "*Chandaraga*, desire and lust, these are fetters." So *chanda* there is not qualified—it's just saying it's a fetter.

There are words like *tanha*, which usually translates as craving, and *upadana*, clinging, usually translated as attachment.

This is quite an interesting word because it means literally a fuel or that which supports something. So it can be grasping, holding on, clinging as something that supports. And what does it support? It supports suffering. But as we go deeper, we'll see that it supports a whole lot more than that. It supports the sense of self, supports the very sense of reality, supports perception too, supports any experience. It's fuel for experience. This is taking the whole thing to another level. We'll come back to this.

But there are all these words in Pali, and in the Pali Canon, one way or another, the Buddha says the path leads to the end of—and he uses any of these words, any of them. So in a way, they're kind of used interchangeably. We can certainly make distinctions and try and carve out distinctions there, but generally, although there are distinctions, generally they're pretty much interchangeable. And the Buddha

and the teachings say they are all fetters. Kāma, tanhā, gedha, rāga, lobha—passion, lust, craving, desire, et cetera. Clinging. All fetters. Saṃyojanāni, which means fetter, something like a yoke—like an oxen or a bull that's plowing a field has a yoke to pull that on—something that imprisons.

The Buddha talks about different fetters, and in the process, in the stages of enlightenment, how different fetters are eradicated—that's really the word that he uses. So kāma-chanda, sensual desire, is eradicated at the third stage of awakening. And at full awakening, full enlightenment, arahantship, the rāga, rūpa-rāga—the passion or the lust for material existence, for material birth, for forms. If you prefer more experientially, getting away from the whole teaching of rebirth and all that, the passion, the lust for material forms. And arūpa-rāgo, the passion and lust for immaterial realms or immaterial jhānas, or if you do the whole rebirth thing, rebirth in a formless realm.

And also eradicated at arahantship is uddhacca, which is an interesting word—restlessness, agitation, excitement, flurry, imbalance, shakiness in the sense of being shaken by experience. It's the opposite of being subdued. It's also related to the word "lifting up"—to lift up, to rise high, to be risen. So that too—being able to be lifted up, being able to be excited out of balance in a flurry, not being subdued. What's the opposite of subdued in English? I don't know, but that's restlessness, sometimes usually translated with uddhacca. That's also eradicated.

As I say, we could make distinctions here. And so one of the distinctions that's quite common to make these days is between craving, tanhā, and clinging, upādāna, so that craving is the momentary impulse to have something or to get away from something. So it can work both ways—as an aversion, aversive movement, to move away from something we don't like, what's unpleasant, or to move towards: "I want that thing, I want to get it, I want to have it." This is craving, that kind of movement of the mind, that desire.

And then, if we distinguish them, clinging, upādāna, is when that becomes more obsessive, if you like, or more entrenched. So we start circling around that thing, thinking about it a lot, scheming in ways to get it, et cetera. There's a consolidation, a tightening, a reinforcing, a solidification that's happening.

So it can be helpful to distinguish them—certainly can be helpful at a certain level—but distinguishing and differentiating them won't actually solve the issues that I want to address and draw attention to tonight. It can be helpful, but those doors that I alluded to earlier that can actually be shut by thinking about practice in a certain way, thinking about practice and Dharma in a certain way, conceiving it in a certain way—they will remain shut, even if I make certain differentiations here among those Pali words.

Historically, by the way, I don't know if there's that much—if you really study the text, you see how much overlap there really is between all these words. And historically, you know, the twelve links of dependent origination—so tanhā and upādāna are two links in those twelve links of dependent origination, of the wheel of suffering, as some people call it. Those twelve links, and in fact the wheel, were actually—there's good evidence—they were taken from a Vedic creation myth that pre-existed the Buddha by a long time.

That would have been a concept, that whole twelve links concept, that was already quite well known in the society. The Buddha picked it up, used those twelve links and the whole as a set, which was already there, and used it in a very different way, pointed in a very different direction.

And one would think, well, if the Vedic hymn had had eleven links, would there be certain distinctions, or would the Buddha have picked up a set with eleven links? Sometimes he talks about dependent origination with ten links. Other times he adds ones, they overlap. So the whole sort of project of getting—and I'll say more about this tomorrow—the whole project of getting too picky about fine distinctions and trying to carve out this kind of clarity is sometimes helpful, sometimes it's actually not that helpful.

Why bother? It actually doesn't open what needs opening. So there's a little caution there.

But for what I want to get at tonight, it actually does not help that much. In probably the second part of this talk, I want to go into and actually explain more in detail a very important practical reason—a reason for practice and for insight—why differentiating, for example, between craving and clinging is actually not that helpful. Sometimes, in fact, it doesn't actually make sense the deeper we go into practice.

But for now, let's respect that distinction that's there with those different words and very briefly go through some examples using the map of the links of dependent origination. I'm hoping you're familiar with this already. I'm going to go through very briefly as a way of looking at the anatomy of that whole process of clinging, craving, desire, and the way it leads to suffering.

We could pick any example, really, all kinds of things—what happens when we see a chocolate cake that looks very enticing, and the whole process that happens there inside us. We could take that as an example. Let's take craving for a cigarette for someone who's addicted to smoking.

If we start, there is delusion—avijjā in Pali—delusional ignorance. Really, in this case, one aspect of that ignorance is not really getting it, not really understanding that this is bad for me, this is not healthy, this will cause suffering in the future to my health. For friends who have family members really, really seriously ill with emphysema after years of smoking, something much earlier on knows this is bad for us, but doesn't really get it. The avijjā is too thick there, too entrenched. And so not really understanding.

And there's saṅkhāra, the second link—this kind of habit formations, if you like, or tendencies. So all the habit of moving to reach for the cigarette pack, to light up, the whole momentum that gets wired into the nervous system, into the mind, into the body. That habit of doing that—those habits involved in that, maybe a habit when we feel a little bit uneasy, that's the impulse to reach for the cigarettes. A little socially anxious, or just after dinner to relax, or whatever it is. But these habits are part of the saṅkhāras.

And then we might take an example—if you're addicted to cigarettes, in this example, and maybe you're out somewhere and you see how the mind and senses, the mind and the consciousness and the sense doors become, if you like, honed or primed or cocked a little bit to notice, for instance, other people

smoking. Maybe we're walking down a city street or sitting outside in a café at night and we see other people smoking and the craving arises so easily. The craving—just this little impulse, this little sort of contraction: "I want." Maybe it barely has a thought at first, but there's a movement, a kind of grasping movement of the being. This craving.

And then that can intensify into what we might call clinging—upādāna. So that this craving, this desire for a cigarette actually comes more to dominance in the mind and maybe the mind starts thinking, "I really need one, I really need a cigarette, I could really use a cigarette" or "It would be really nice," whatever it is. So thinking starts to get involved and it starts to become more dominant and more tenacious. The grasping is more tenacious.

And then this intensifies even more to what could be called becoming. Sometimes it's translated as becoming. So maybe we do start playing with the cigarette packet, maybe even take a cigarette out, roll it in our fingers, maybe even stick it unlit in the mouth and just sort of hang it there. "That's okay, right? Because I haven't lit it yet."

And maybe we say to ourselves, "Ah, just one, you know, I know I was going to quit, I can quit tomorrow," or whatever, and the mind starts justifying something to itself, justifying this whole mechanism of desire in its wily ways.

And eventually, this gathers enough force and momentum and dominance that we do light up—light that cigarette, take a long inhale, and then there's relief with that, relief of all this tension that was building up, both through the physical addiction in this case, but also the tension of what was involved in the mind there. There's lighting up and enjoying that cigarette.

And in a way, that process—because there's taken birth, physical birth, as the smoker self. The smoker is born at that point. But unfortunately, that relieved smoker self is a very fragile, sort of brittle self. And very soon, something flips. And maybe a little while after the cigarette, you start to feel, "I failed. I failed in my resolve." Maybe the self becomes "I'm weak. I can't do it. I don't have the willpower. I'm bad in some ways."

So there's this relieved self, the smoker self, that was enjoying a cigarette that was born. It actually dies. It fractures. It collapses. And it's actually replaced with a suffering self, if you like. You could say that. So death and...

those words—despair, lamentation, sorrow, grief. These are strong words indeed, yet from the suffering that accompanies them emerges something more. In this case, perhaps it's the view "I just can't do it. I failed again. I'm weak." The suffering doesn't end there, though. Out of that suffering, those self-views become reinforced. The belief that "I can't" takes hold, and through that very belief, paradoxically, the will—the willpower to quit smoking—is strengthened. Something continues to roll on, samsara flowing forward like a great wheel.

The habits, the sankhāras, those deep movements and programming of the mind and body's tendencies—in this case, reaching for cigarettes when we don't feel good, or when we do feel good, or in whatever circumstances—all of this becomes reinforced through the entire process. Each time through the cycle gives the whole wheel momentum. This is how these processes work, how they perpetuate themselves.

Let me offer another example, perhaps more intricate. Imagine I've been out for a night with friends at a bar, and there's a group of women there. With my male friends, a few of us go over to chat with these women, and I find myself talking with one I find attractive. During this brief conversation, she seems perhaps a little coy, but I give her my number—a card with my phone number.

Wrapped up in this simple gesture, in my impulse to act, is a whole constellation of avijjā—delusion, ignorance. It's never simple. Let's say I carry a particular pattern of believing that if a woman shows interest in me, it proves my okayness, my lovability. There's this belief that something external can prove something fundamental about the self. All kinds of delusion are woven through this—even within that single belief about what would prove my lovability, you can see countless components involved.

With that particular ball of avijjā operating, I also carry—unfortunately—a tendency to view myself as perhaps not okay, as maybe not attractive. Alongside this comes the compulsion to try to prove my attractiveness, my okayness, both to others and to myself. There's the belief that I'm not okay, the belief in what would prove otherwise, the tendency to see myself through this lens, and the drive to prove it constantly. How much of our actions, our choices, our speech, our dress, our entire way of being becomes organized around trying to prove something to the world?

Already there's dukkha present—you can see the pain inherent in this whole structure. And having given her my number and walked away, the entire interaction has loaded my consciousness. Because of the avijjā, because of the sankhāras, it has loaded and primed my consciousness, my mind, and my senses.

The next day, the following few days, I'm at work and can observe how consciousness perhaps narrows around this single point: Is she going to call? Maybe it builds, and the body keeps checking the mobile phone—any messages? Any messages? The pattern intensifies, actually impinging on my ability to concentrate on other things, like work itself.

Craving is already present, and craving is always complex. I'm craving a certain sound—that message notification from my phone—but wrapped up in that simple desire is so much more. I'm craving the ability to check, to know. There's craving operating on multiple levels simultaneously.

Perhaps I even become irritated during those stretches when I can't check—when I have to attend a meeting with the boss, present something important, or listen very carefully to what's being said. In those moments when I must be fully present elsewhere, there's irritation because I cannot check my messages.

This whole process builds, and perhaps there's an increasing frequency to the checking, obsessive

thinking spiraling around this one interaction. Throughout all of this, I can notice how my mood and self-view are buffeted around by waves of excitement, anticipation, hope, anxiety, despondency. The emotional landscape becomes a turbulent sea, rising and falling moment by moment.

I don't recognize the number. Oh, maybe this is her. And I pick it up and it's someone trying to sell me health insurance or something. So there was that swelling up, anticipation, excitement, the becoming, and then the crash.

Or again, it rings, and again, it's a number I don't recognize. I pick it up, it's just someone with the wrong number. And the same thing, this rise and fall of the becoming of the self.

And then maybe a few days goes by, a week or I don't know how long, and she doesn't call. But in that week, I'm becoming increasingly despondent. She won't call. And that's reinforcing something: I am unattractive. It's true.

Let's say she doesn't call. And then that self-view gets solidified. Now I have evidence there. Usually this is not so clear as a thinking process. It's kind of jammed together like spaghetti that has melted into each other. It's not so clear - she didn't call, therefore I'm unattractive. Something's happening in the whole mind. It's getting compressed and mixed up and confused and oppressed. But basically she didn't call, and this self-view of being somehow not okay, somehow unattractive, has been solidified through this whole process.

Then a little more time goes by, a week or a couple of weeks or whatever, and that whole painful self-view that has become so jammed and dense and heavy and painful - actually just over time, being involved in other stuff, having other things demand my attention, preoccupations, distractions, whatever - it gets a little less solid, a little more broken up, a little less intense. There is the breakup or the death, if you like, of that self-view to a certain extent. In this case, it's a negative self-view that's dying.

But still, so there's some relief, but still, what the Buddha called the āsavas, the outflows, the effluent - actually it's related to the word for sewage - the effluent, the outflows from all that. If I don't question all this business about self-view and how I'm trying to prove something to myself and to the world, if I don't question all that, the avijjā, the ignorance, and the saṅkhāras, the tendencies to try and prove, to believe certain things. Without questioning, then through that process, that whole cycle goes through its whole painful contractions and life and death and dissolution and relative disappearance or abeyance for a time.

But without the questioning of my belief that I need to somehow - that there's one way to address this sense of unattractiveness or not-okayness, that's by proving it - without questioning all that, I'm just reinforcing. The whole pattern gets reinforced. So it rose up, it got solid, it dissolved over time, but because there was no questioning, the whole thing just got reinforced. The seeds have gotten bigger. So the next time it comes back, it's perhaps even a little bit stronger. And this will happen until something other, until I have another way of relating, understanding, prying loose this whole process.

Pain. Craving and clinging and all that process, bringing suffering, bringing dukkha.

Now sometimes what we crave is actually what the Buddha called vibhava-taṇhā, a craving for a kind of non-being, for a kind of extinction. Sometimes we have that just when we want to go to bed at night because we're tired and just want to turn everything off - I've had enough of the day. But sometimes in really strong instances, for instance someone wanting to just get completely plastered drunk, there's something seeking a kind of oblivion and a kind of dissolution of the self in that wish that we seek - obliteration, oblivion, a kind of extinction, the vibhava-taṇhā.

Sometimes what's happening in the object that we seem to be craving - maybe it's the chocolate cake or whatever - is that there's actually a painful emotion underneath. Maybe we feel lonely. Maybe we feel unloved. And it's painful to be with that. Something in the chocolate cake and in that whole putting it in the mouth and chewing it in a primal way - there is pleasure involved in that, absolutely. But at another level of the craving, we're seeking to obliterate or cover over or numb out the painful emotion underlying it. This is quite common with food.

So it's complex, all this. There are different forces operating, if you like, different intentions operating.

What's also interesting is that if we pay attention to this, actually craving itself is uncomfortable. There's a kind of pressure that builds with craving. I want that thing - like with the cigarette example, or it could be chocolate cake, whatever it is.

And that craving itself is dukkha. It feels uncomfortable. So what we end up actually wanting by the time we have access to the cigarette or the cake or whatever it is, is actually seeking both the pleasure of the object and the relief of the pressure—the bursting of that uncomfortable bubble of craving pressure. We're seeking a kind of obliteration of the uncomfortable tension that craving itself creates.

So all this can be involved in what's going on for us with cravings and clinging, and that whole process.

Now, we could have gone through this much more slowly. We could certainly devote a whole talk to one example like this, taking apart the pieces and mapping them onto those twelve links. If you want more detail with more distinctions, this kind of material isn't hard to find these days. One place is in the book I wrote, *Seeing That Frees*—chapter ten, I think, is devoted to going into this in quite a lot of detail. Or Payutto, a Thai monk, wrote a book called *Dependent Origination*. You can find it easily, and it's not difficult to understand. It's just, as I said, a kind of anatomy.

Several times over the years with different groups, I've done teaching sessions where we literally lay out these twelve links on the floor, and then we go through different scenarios—how suffering gets built up and tied together and contracted in difficult situations, either real ones or hypothetical ones. It's almost always interesting to me how much people enjoy doing that.

You have this map and you're together looking at, if you like, the tragedy but also the comedy of the

human mind in this process of tying itself up in knots. People really seem to enjoy this kind of dissecting of the anatomy or physiology—the process of suffering and clinging in this way. And partly it's because something in the human mind seems to like chopping things up and mapping them out and feeling like, "Oh, there's this word that the Buddha used, and there's this in my experience, and I can map them together." We seem to recognize something of a truth here, and so we have the feeling: "I've understood something. I recognize a component of the process and I understand it."

So people often enjoy that feeling. But I'm often not at all convinced that this seeming recognition and so-called understanding actually makes much difference. Is it really helpful? What we really need here are practices to be able to actually pick up these concepts—if those are the concepts we're using—and really practice with them.

So if we're using this idea of the twelve links of dependent origination, where exactly can I come in during that process? What are the points of entry? There are various points where I can actually come in and contemplate in a different way in the moment, or pay attention, bringing mindfulness to bear on a certain link or feature in ways that actually make a difference—that relieve suffering, that disband to a certain extent some suffering.

Without that, we get this really unfortunate illusion of understanding something because it looks like we're being clear since we've got something that appears concrete and mapped onto concepts that are in the teachings, that the Buddha used, that otherwise might have remained more abstract. So we think, "Great, I've understood something." There's this clarity of carving up and mapping and corresponding concepts. What we really need is to be at the front line, so to speak, where the action is, with ways of practicing that are powerful, specific, and helpful.

So the Buddha said a lot about all this, and in different ways. He pointed out we can cling—there are lists of what we can cling to or crave. For instance, to sense pleasures is an obvious one. We cling to the pleasures available in the senses. We cling, he said, also to our views and opinions. We cling to our customs and habits, wherever they come from—personal or more social or cultural or religious or secular. And we also cling to self-views, the different views of the self, beliefs about the self.

So all that's there. Sometimes people dissect this anatomy and present it as a teaching or try to approach the teachings that way. And sometimes, with all this there and the Buddha making all these distinctions, what we take as the message is this teaching: just let go of everything. Just let go of everything.

Even as I say it now, you can recognize it simultaneously feels like a hugely tall order. And at the same time, it's so attractive as a teaching. It's so simple: just let go of everything. Something in us loves simplicity. Something in us is seduced by simplicity and simple teachings and simple solutions.

Even if we acknowledge that that's very challenging, it's a very simple message: Just let go of everything. Just go with the flow. Be with the flow. Just be in the moment. Be in the present. But don't even cling to

that idea. Just be in the present. Very simple.

The attraction of what I've called "simplism" in other teachings, in other talks I've given, leads us to say: in this "just let go of everything" approach, liberation has nothing to do per se with an experience or any particular experience. So you get the instruction: don't try to repeat experiences. Even if they're wonderful, insightful experiences and openings and mystical experiences—don't try to repeat them. That's just clinging. Just let go of everything. Let go of everything.

Liberation is a relationship of non-clinging with experience. That's what liberation is. Liberation is non-clinging. So it's not an experience—it's a relationship. Very enticing and attractive, the simplicity of that teaching.

People are different. They may take some of those divisions that the Buddha talked about and take them as areas of investigation. But basically, the teaching is: let go of everything. Just let go of everything.

Of course, some people are completely over-simplistic, almost not even going into any tools of how we might actually let go of everything. But generally speaking, we offer tools, and tools are offered.

The first one would be: Well, for a start, how do I notice craving? Do I even recognize the experience of craving? Because how can I let go if I don't recognize it? So that's an important aspect here, an important question: How do I notice craving? How do I notice that movement of desire or clinging, whatever we want to call it?

One obvious way is my thoughts tell me. So I have to be aware of my thoughts. My thoughts tell me when they keep returning to the same object. When I hear the mind say "I want," or even more, "I need"—craving. "I need that chocolate cake" or whatever it is. So my thoughts tell me in different ways. They reveal the presence of clinging by the way they circle around some object or start to obsess around something.

But perhaps more than that, we can recognize that craving itself, as I mentioned earlier, is already dukkha. It's not just that it leads to dukkha—so this smoking will cause suffering, etc. The experience of craving itself, the force of craving itself, is already uncomfortable. It's already a dis-ease. There is dukkha there.

So this presence of dukkha, my mindfulness revealing a feeling of dukkha—just slight dis-ease, uneasiness, imbalance, if you like—all that reveals: "Aha, there's some craving. What is it that I'm craving?"

This happens at a much more subtle level than would be revealed in our thoughts, because craving can be quite active and quite present even when there's no thought in the mind. When there's no thought, there can still be craving.

This is what I want to go into, probably in the next talk: when we use these words "craving" and "clinging,"

we're really talking about a huge range, from very, very gross and obvious to extremely subtle. At some point, thought no longer needs to be there for the more subtle aspects or subtle manifestations of craving.

But when there is craving, there is noticeable—almost all the time—a tension that is noticeable.

In the body, maybe in the musculature, maybe even more subtle than that when it gets really quite subtle, in the sort of felt space of what I call the energy body or the subtle body, a tension, a contraction comes in. And even more subtle than that, in what we might call the mind space. Again, it's not about thoughts. It's about there's a certain cramping in the otherwise more natural spaciousness and openness of the mind.

So this is what tells me that craving is present—this tension, contraction, which will be felt as some degree of dis-ease in the body or mind space. That's different than deliberately narrowing the attention, like right now I can deliberately focus my attention on the tip of my index finger and the sensations right there in the middle. So I'm deliberately narrowing. That's fine. That's a mode of mind, if you like. But with craving, there's a tension contraction that comes into the body and the mind space that we can feel and that we can get increasingly sensitive to noticing.

Now, one teaching would be when you notice craving, just let go of the craving. Just let go of whatever it is you're craving. Let go of that. Again, sounds simple, and it might work sometimes. It's just let go of wanting the chocolate cake. You know, just let go. And if I'm attached to views, so-and-so said this, but I think that's wrong. It's like, just let go of it.

So that's one kind of instruction—just notice it and let it go. Let's run through a few of the maybe more common tools that are in the service of this just-let-go-of-everything sort of teaching.

One is notice it and let go of whatever the object that you're craving is or whatever you're clinging to, which sometimes works and, as you will all know, sometimes does not work.

Second would be to use some skillful reflection. So here's this thing, maybe it's that chocolate cake. I notice there's this craving towards it, whatever. And just to reflect, for example, on the common teaching on the impermanence of sense pleasures. So I'm going to eat that slice of chocolate cake or three slices of chocolate cake, and then an hour later, either I'm going to have a tummy ache if I've eaten too much, or it will just be gone. Where did it go? Where is that pleasure now? How much lasting fulfillment can it really give me?

This is a very common teaching—just reflect on the impermanence of sense pleasures, of what we're clinging to. And if it's clinging to views and opinions, it's actually reflecting, well, how many times in the past have I changed my view? Sometimes to a diametrically opposed one. And oftentimes I have views and opinions about things that I actually don't really know, if I'm really honest. I don't know what the truth is there. And I'm so attached to my view and my opinion. And just to reflect, I don't really know. Or my view might change.

Or to reflect, here's this clinging. Here's maybe this obsession about something or again, whatever, the chocolate cake or whatever. Is this clinging or this obsession or this thing that my mind keeps chewing over, is this really taking me where I want to go? So I could go down this road of thinking about this, obsessing about it, worrying about it, fretting about it, etc. What will I have at the end of that? Will I have what I really want? Will I have peace? Will I have fulfillment?

I'm going through this very quickly, and we will touch on these in the instructions, but you can find all this in plenty of other places, so I'm just running through it to set a context for the other material that I want to touch on. This is very common. I and probably every teacher, every Dharma teacher has given these kind of teachings.

But that would be the second—skillful reflection.

The third possible tool is to become acquainted with, through mindfulness, what we call papañca—proliferation, exaggeration, hype, storytelling that goes on, that the mind gets into when it gets really crazy about something. So I didn't really elaborate, but for example, in the example where I gave the woman my number and then the whole story building and hype around it. Or maybe it's something that we want and...

or that's really terrible if it happens. And there's a whole identity view and story and history and hyping up of the self and the issue involved. And we can see this happening. This is another thing on retreats – how happy people are to hear stories, funny stories of papanca. It's a relief. We realize, oh, you know, I'm not the only one to be crazy that way. But just hearing these stories, or just recognizing them intellectually, isn't going to cut it at a very deep level.

At any rate, we begin to recognize, our mindfulness begins to get more familiar with these times and states of mind when the mind has just got into a complete spin. And we could say, using language a certain way, that when it's in this state of proliferation and storm building – building a storm in a teacup – we are fabricating. The mind is fabricating.

Instead of being with the basic experience of something – here is this contraction in my chest – and instead of just being with the sensations, I'm bringing in a whole story of my patterns of closed-heartedness and that has to do with my mother and her mother and all this stuff, and something that's at one level just some sensations that will pass has become this whole heavy story that it's absolutely terrible, I must get rid of this, et cetera, et cetera.

Afterwards, when it dissolves a little bit, we begin to see, oh, we're fabricating something. There was this punctual state, and this whole web weaving of complication and elaboration and proliferation around self and around issue and all of that. There's fabrication.

In contrast to that, when we're simply mindful, we can be – there's the sensation in the chest, yeah, it's contraction, it's unpleasant – and we can be with that sensation in what we sometimes call bare attention.

That state of mindfulness and of bare attention is a state of no papanca and no fabrication. We're just with the thing as it is.

Through repeated mindfulness practice, we actually get more of a taste for this, more of a taste of living without papanca, not caught up in the maelstrom in that teacup, not entangled in the cobwebs and the imprisonment, really, of all this intricate, thick, over-elaborated storytelling.

So a degree of clinging and craving is released when we let go of that papanca and we're with things more in the way of what we could call simple mindfulness or bare attention, or we could say being with things as they are, simply. This simple mindfulness practice in contrast to papanca – and seeing that, or seeming to see that we're not fabricating when we're mindful – that's a skillful tool too.

Another one, a little bit more precise, if you like – let's take a negative example. For example, the craving to be rid of something, what we call aversion. So here, maybe I'm sitting on a retreat or something, and my back hurts, or my knees hurt. There's the unpleasant vedana, the unpleasant sensations. And there's a craving to be rid of them. There's a rejection. There's a pushing away.

Again, maybe my mind is saying, "Oh, come on, ring the bell. When's this sitting over?" And spinning all kinds of stories about, again, I have this pain because I'm such a contracted human being, et cetera, et cetera. Other people don't have it, whatever it is.

But maybe even without thought – as I said, there's no thought. There's just this pain and this energetic push, rejection of that experience, a kind of tensing of the being, of the body and of the mind to get rid of, to hold it at arm's length, to push it away. And this again, we can feel, we can notice.

One skillful strategy is actually just to come to train the attention and just see – can I hold it right at that point in the body where the unpleasant vedana are just coming up like a fountain? Moment after moment, there's that unpleasantness, unpleasant sensation, unpleasant sensation, unpleasant sensation in my back or in my knee or whatever it is. Looking at it that way, and kind of intent, but with some relaxation as well, in a kind of balanced way, just honing, training, focusing the attention just as much as I can at that fountain, if you like, of moment-to-moment unpleasant vedana.

Then I'll notice the craving go with that. So there's the unpleasant vedana, there's this rejection. And they kind of go together. But what I can see is this arising and unpleasant sensation, and then this kind of impulse of rejection, this energetic push away.

Of course, I can see this with pleasant sensations as well. Sometimes it's really interesting eating and watching this movement. Here's this delicious food that's been maybe, again, on retreat cooked for me, or cooked it for myself at home, whatever it is, and I'm eating, and I'm really paying attention to the arising of the pleasant sensations in the mouth. The food is in my mouth. And then I can still notice, curiously, how something in the being, in the mind, is kind of grasping.

It's like this movement of grasping, movement towards, to hold, to grasp, to hold onto, to encompass those pleasant sensations. So I see the pleasantness, and I see this impulsive, energetic movement to grasp. The food is already in my mouth, and the pleasantness is already there, and there's still this grasping. So I can see it either way.

And I begin to, or I stay steady at the vedanā, and then what happens is that—and again, this is separating notions of craving from clinging—I see the craving, the impulse arise, but it doesn't build up so much. So I can just stay, for example, with this pain in the body, this moment-to-moment arising of pain, and just watch these little bursts of impulse, of craving, of rejection, of pushing away, arise. But they don't—they just sort of arise and they subside. They arise and they subside. And this consolidation and building of that and solidification and entrenchment of that into what might be called clinging, it doesn't arise because I'm just staying closer to the vedanā and the craving. So that would be a fourth approach.

A fifth is again relating back to what I touched on earlier—to actually develop an ability where I'm paying more attention to the actual experience of craving and noticing that pressure that is involved in craving. So back to the cigarette example or the chocolate cake example, whatever it is. Here the mind has the image of the cigarette, and then there's this—I can feel this pressure build of the craving, or maybe it's clinging. I can feel that pressure build in the body, maybe even more than the mind. And instead of seeking to obliterate and release and sort of pop that uncomfortable bubble of pressure by having the cigarette, I'm actually learning to just give that some space. Just let that pressure kind of build, ebb, and swell. And then I'll notice, oh, it reaches a certain point and it just subsides again. And maybe it does that again. But what's happening there is I'm staying with it and giving it space. That's key. And I'm learning to tolerate it. I'm developing my capacity to tolerate that uncomfortable pressure so that I don't just have to give into it.

And in time, what happens is instead of getting reinforced, that force of craving, instead of being reinforced because I keep giving into it, because I can't tolerate that pressure, I tolerate the pressure, it flows. It releases. It subsides. And over time, the very force of the craving, when it comes back next time, is a little less, a little less. So I'm learning the skill of tolerating. I'm also eroding that particular craving and maybe the pattern of craving in general. So that would be a fifth option.

And a sixth is more general, touching on what we discussed, elaborating a little bit more what we said before—actually just paying attention to impermanence in general. Really being aware, anicca. Everything is impermanent. Everything is impermanent. So this is so much the thrust of so much insight meditation. Just see that everything is impermanent. Just notice. How can you not but notice? If you're mindful, you'll see that things are impermanent. And we start to notice it more and more. And if we notice that things are impermanent, we let go. We see there's no point chasing things that will just be impermanent. There's no point clinging to things that are going to dissolve anyway.

So, at least that's the theory. And there's a certain amount of truth in that. When we see impermanence,

we let go. So the noticing of impermanence, the attention to impermanence, generally speaking, brings letting go. And maybe, and that would be a sixth possibility, maybe with that sixth possibility, we have times where we, eventually through practice, there are times where we see, wow, there really is just this process of impermanent things. Where is the personality here? The personality is a process that's constructed. The self is just a process of momentary phenomena, momentary factors of mind, momentary moments of perception or consciousness or impulse. There is just this process of impermanent events or impermanent things.

And I am like that, the self is like that, everything is... that's all there is. And again, generally speaking, when we see that, a degree of fundamental avijjā, fundamental delusion about reality, if you like, is cut away. And there's generally speaking less clinging, because there's... if you like, a less solidified... We don't believe so much in such a solidified sense of self. And sometimes that's what happens, and that does work.

But you can already... Here, I'm not... I apologize. I'm not selling this very well. I perhaps could have done a better job of selling it. But in a way, that's my whole point. That's my whole point.

So all this, what I've said so far, and what I've laid out in terms of teachings and approaches to letting go of clinging and desire and craving and all that, in these ways and these approaches — it's not that it's wrong. It's not wrong. It's all good. It's not that the understanding is wrong, per se, but it is limited. That's my main point. It's limited in both depth and breadth.

If we only respond to desire, and only view desire, for example, with the lens "what can this really give me? Because everything's impermanent, might as well let go." Or if we only try to live with mindfulness, with so-called bare attention, staying at the so-called bare experience, or staying at the vedanā even, if we believe that mindfulness and so-called bare attention is really a state of non-papañca, non-proliferation, and really a state of complete non-fabrication. If this kind of more or less sums up my Dharma practice and what I'm trying to do and how I conceive of the Dharma, then I will have missed, and I will continue to miss the possibility of really deep insight.

There's something there, as I said, the beginning shuts off certain doors, in this case, the doors of depth, the doors to a much more radical depth. It also, living that way, viewing that way, those ways, is simply not always going to be helpful. There will be situations, there will be instances, there will be streams or threads in my life where it's very helpful, but there will be plenty where it just is not helpful. I just need some intelligence and some reflection to expose that fact. Plenty of threads in my life where it's completely not helpful to live with, to approach it with bare attention, to approach the dropping of desire because "what can this really give me?" to believe I'm being with reality through mindfulness. All of that, there's a kind of, if I try and do that, if even with the sort of feeling of breadth and all-encompassingness, or especially if I have that feeling of all-encompassing, it's going to be, there's something a bit, I don't know, silly in it.

Because as well, as well as just simply discerning what are helpful and unhelpful desires in different

situations, and very basic, we haven't even talked about that. But as well as that, so much more is possible. So much more is possible.

So how do we think of the Dharma? Is the Dharma, was the Buddha just saying, let go, let go, don't cling and live peacefully. Let go and live peacefully. Is that what the Dharma is? Is that all the Dharma can be? Let go and live peacefully. Whose Buddha is that?

Or is it, and this is what I want to go into in a bit more detail, is it, first of all, that through practice, through picking up this idea of clinging to craving, et cetera, and exploring it experientially with a certain, what I'm going to call practical intelligence, facility in practice. And I start to learn something about letting go of clinging through practice at deeper, what I call deeper and deeper levels.

And something happens in that process — the whole world of experience opens up, dissolves, opens up to a completely different level, if you like. A mystical opening, mystical openings, plural. You can see the whole world unbound. We open to the unfabricated. If we follow this thread of clinging in certain ways, or letting go of clinging, we follow that. Subtler and subtler, deeper and deeper, we begin to, we can know what is unfabricated. Radical, different sense of existence, and we understand the emptiness of all things. Something very, very deep, very profound here.

So if we, again going back to what we said before, if we, even contemplating impermanence more and more rapidly in the meditation, mindfulness gets very intense...

It's true that sometimes we're really intensely focusing on rapid impermanence very finely, and something can happen that can kind of pop that whole experience. Suddenly the walls are shattered, and the walls of the world are shattered, and we are opened to the unfabricated. No subject, no object, no thing, no experience in any kind of conventional sense. No space, no time. Not just no past and future, no present. Something utterly, utterly transcendent and different.

But I'm not quite sure how that happened. I was just contemplating impermanence and then something popped. And it might be that indeed, a certain freedom comes out of that exposure to the unfabricated, that knowing of that. But I come back to the ordinary world of experience, of ordinary appearances, and perhaps it's not really clear to me what the relationship is of that world of appearances to that world of non-appearance, of the unfabricated.

Somehow I need to be contemplating this whole teaching about clinging and practicing with the teachings about clinging in ways that let me understand something about the relationship between appearances and what we might call non-appearance or the unfabricated. The relationship of this world of time, where it seems obvious that everything is impermanent, and the world of the timeless. Not the world of permanence, but not the world of impermanence—the world of timelessness. What's the relationship there?

And might not a fuller freedom, a deeper freedom, a more beautiful freedom, and a greater sense of

beauty come when I really understand through approaching the teachings about clinging practically in meditation, in certain ways, in ways that let me understand this relationship of appearances to non-experiences? The relationship of the experience of non-appearance, the experience of the unfabricated, of the timeless, to the world of appearances, experience, conventional experiences, and time.

So if I'm too simplistic and I have the goal of just living without clinging—that's what liberation is—and I'm not picking up this teaching of clinging in a way that's actually going to unlock something much more profound, reveal something about existence much more profound, much more radical, there's a danger there. I need to pick it up in a way that will help me do that.

So it can be limited if I take the teachings in a way that will limit them. It's limited in depth. It's also limited in breadth, and that's the second thing that I want to go into. Again, just having the idea of letting go of desire, letting go of craving, and so forth. Even when we differentiate wholesome and unwholesome desires, even then, what I would like to go into is there will be something in that way of approaching things, something in that attempt, something in that conception of the Dharma—of what practice is and where it's leading—that will not allow an adequate view of self, of others, of things, of the world, and also of desire itself.

In other ways, not just to do with this depth of knowing the unfabricated, depth of knowing the emptiness of things, but in other ways it will not be adequate. That's what I want to go into on this retreat.

So there's a possibility that the way we're thinking about these teachings about non-clinging, the way that we're conceiving of it is, if you like, over-simplistic, and it will limit both the depth that we're able to open to—and that's our whole sense of existence—and also, if you like, a kind of breadth in terms of how we then view the things of this world in other ways, which I'll go into that have to do with beauty and sacredness. So this is what I hope to elaborate.

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