# The Way of Non-Clinging (Part 2)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:14:05

Okay, so how might we think about this teaching about clinging and dukkha? How might we conceive of it and this aim of non-clinging? How might we conceive of that and approach it in practice in ways that do open up the full depth of what is possible and do not constrain the breadth of beauty and possibility for us? What are the possibilities of conceiving and approaching in practice this area, this theme of the teaching?

There are a few ways into this we could go, but let me try and say something briefly about it. One possibility is to take up this theme, not to actually wait until we're in the grip of some obsessive contraction of clinging around something or other and then try and let go of that. Important as that is to address those kinds of states of mind and states of being when they arise and how we can find some relief, how we can see in a different way. But actually to take up this theme of clinging and craving as a theme and to run with it, even when it seems like there's not much craving going on.

So, for example, in sitting or walking meditation, standing meditation, whatever, we can actually—as I mentioned in the last talk, in the first part of this talk—begin to get familiar and more and more sensitivity to the experience of craving and clinging. This experience of something contracting in the mind and the body. Even when there's no thought there, something's contracting towards a sensation, towards an idea, towards an image, away from. So it could be grasping at something or pushing something away, grasping or aversion. And this subtle feeling we get more and more familiar with.

We notice this is dukkha. This is dukkha. This contraction itself feels unpleasant. As I said, it might be much subtler than even noticeable in the musculature. We're talking about just the sense of the subtle body, the energy body, the sense of the space of the mind. Feeling it, feeling its dukkha. We're talking about subtle dukkha now. Feeling that subtle dukkha and relaxing the subtle body, relaxing the energy, relaxing that tension that's come in with that grasping of clinging craving. Releasing it.

This is actually working directly with the energy of that contraction and releasing the contraction. Now you could, as I said in the first part, think about the object, you could contemplate its impermanence, etc. Or you can work directly with the actual energetics of clinging, of craving. So that's an alternative way.

If you start doing this and you start actually getting quite skilled—there's an art in this—and you start to develop a sensitivity, as I said, it gets more subtle. Because when I let go of, when I release a certain amount of craving, calmness comes into the being, the body, the mind. There's an openness, there's a calmness. And that calmness, like when the water is calm in a pond or a lake or something, I can actually pick up even more subtle levels of craving. So then I can feel that very subtle and release those, and even

more calm.

So the very calmness that's made possible through the release, again and again, of finding some craving, releasing it, finding some craving and releasing it, the calmness that can open up through that actually allows me to go deeper and more subtle into the process. This is actually a very enjoyable process. Most people who work that way in practice find it's a very lovely way to practice. Very lovely. All kinds of beauty and softening and ease come in.

And I start to notice something. First thing is, oh yes, when I let go of the craving, the dukkha releases. So we could say the dukkha is being fabricated by the craving. So I really get, I feel viscerally in my felt experience again and again, I just see craving, dukkha, craving, dukkha. And I feel it, I feel its tension, and I feel the ease, the relief of the dukkha right there. And dukkha here means something really quite broad in its range, really from quite gross to really quite subtle.

But as I develop this practice and work with it and enjoy it and develop my sensitivity and the art of it, I also start to realize that the sense of self is also fabricated with and by the craving. In other words, the more craving, the more solid the center self, the more contracted, the more separate from others or from the world.

So this sense of self, I start to see it, like the dukkha, move up and down on a spectrum of fabrication. Sometimes it's so solid, so dense, so separate. And when I let go of craving, when I let go at the deeper end of this spectrum, the whole sense of self gets much lighter, much more transparent, much more melted, much less well-defined. Its edges more melt into a kind of oneness, etc., or begin to dissolve in different ways.

And then correspondingly, there's a mutual dependence the other way. The stronger the sense of self, the more that tends to build craving—unless we come in and work with it this other way by releasing. But the sense of self, the experience of dukkha and the experience of self are dependent on craving. More craving, more self, if you like.

Less craving, less self gets fabricated. Very interesting.

It doesn't stop there either. Because again, as I develop this practice and I enjoy it and I get into it and feel the yumminess of it, I start to see not just dukkha, not just the sense of myself in the moment, but also the sense of the very objects that I'm paying attention to and the sense of the very world that I feel myself to be in. That too gets correspondingly more solid, more separate, more of an issue, more prominent in consciousness to the degree that I am craving. More craving, more solid and more dense and more real, if you like, the world becomes—more oppressive. Let go of craving, let go at a deeper level, start to see these dependencies, start to see objects too begin to fade out. They begin to melt, they begin to blur. The very perception of objects, the very perception of the world is also dependent on craving to a certain extent.

Now some people find this practice really works and can take it very, very deep. Other people reach a sort

of limit and they have to slightly change the practice or move to something else. But basically, one way of understanding what's happening there is that we are at any moment in time always inevitably engaging what I would call a way of looking. That's a shorthand phrase. What it really means is a way of looking, a way of perceiving, a way of relating, and a way of conceiving.

I use this word "conceiving" not just to mean thinking about. Even when I'm not thinking, I'm still conceiving. I'm still vaguely feeling there's a me and an it—there's a self, a subject, and an object, and it's happening in time, even if it's just this present moment. Nothing else going on but the consciousness and the object and a present moment. That's still conception. I've got the tripod there: subject, object, time—still conception. So I use this word "conceiving" to mean something much, much deeper and more pervasive and more subtle than thinking, but it also includes thinking.

So "way of looking" wraps up all together, in any moment, the way of relating, the way of perceiving, seeing, sensing, and the way of conceiving. All that together—just for shorthand, I'm calling it a way of looking. And in any moment, there's always a way of looking. There's always a way of looking.

Now that way of looking might have a lot of clinging in it, or it might have less clinging, or it might have really a little clinging. It might have really, really, really only the subtlest clinging. But always, at some moment, I'm somewhere—the mind, the being, is somewhere on that spectrum of how much clinging and what kinds of clinging are going on in the way of looking.

And I start to see, I start to make connections here. Dependent on the way of looking, including how much and what kind of clinging is going on, dependent on that is my experience—experience of dukkha certainly, experience of self as well, and experience of the object that I'm paying attention to, the objects and the world around me. Also the experience of time, all kinds of things. More clinging, more fabrication of dukkha, of self, of objects, of world. Less clinging, less fabrication.

So there is, as I said, a spectrum of subtlety. It gets extremely subtle, and as we all know, can be very, very gross—the level of clinging and the solidity that comes into all these experiences of dukkha, of self, of other, of world.

When you start to explore this way, apart from the loveliness of this practice—so uncovering more subtle levels of dukkha is actually contrary to what it might sound at first. You might think, oh, that's horrific, this sort of excavation of more and more dukkha, more and more clinging, suffering. No, because I'm feeling dukkha, I'm releasing it, I'm finding ways of releasing it—actually it feels very beautiful. There's great beauty, great, as I said, yumminess, really, in this practice. Really, really lovely way of practicing.

As I start to do this, the whole distinction between words like "clinging" and "craving" also starts to melt. It's okay, it's valid at a certain level, but actually it's not really getting to the really juicy stuff. It's not really opening things out in a very deep way to hang on to, to cling, in effect, to a distinction between craving and clinging, for instance.

When I start to see—if I'm just picking this one way of practicing as a way in, I could pick another one—when I start to see the dependent arising and the fabrication of my entire experience—but let's just say, for now, just of self, but also of objects, as I said—the dependent arising, the arising dependent on the way of looking, dependent on the mind, and dependent, essentially, on the clinging. The fabrication—if we say the same thing in other words—the fabrication of the sense of self, the fabrication of the appearances of things and of objects and of time and of world and all of that, dependent on clinging. And I start to understand: what does it mean to say that the self is empty? What does it mean to say that appearances appear, but they are empty? They're dependent arisings.

They're fabrications. They're illusory. They do not exist. This self-sense that seems so real, this object-sense that seems so real—this thing before me, this thing in my mind, this emotion, whatever it is—seems so real. Yet it's a dependent arising. It's a fabricated illusion. It is not a thing in itself without the mind clinging at it or to it.

I start to understand, probably beginning to see it more easily with the self, though it can happen in different ways. And then maybe that leads to another kind of practice. Perhaps I see a certain amount of the fabrication of the self, the dependent arising emptiness of the self through this developed art of letting go of clinging and craving. I start to develop a conviction: yes, this self is an illusion.

So when it feels like I'm looking at something and I say, "Oh, that's me, it's me, I am this mind," or "I am this consciousness," or "That is my body," or "This is my emotion," or whatever, I start to see, "Oh, that's kind of an illusion"—because I've seen this whole self is a construction, a concoction, a fabrication. It's a sankhāra, in the Buddha's words.

Then maybe I can move to another kind of practice, which is: let me just dwell in my sitting meditation, in my walking meditation, in my standing meditation, and whatever arises, I'm regarding it as anattā. Attā means self in Pali; anattā means not-self. This is not-self. This is not me. This is not mine.

So this becomes a way of looking. Some people can move straight into that practice. Other people need to do another practice that enables it a little bit. At some point I could, if I want, change practices and move into that. It's another way of looking. I'm regarding whatever comes up as anattā—whatever comes up is not self, is not me, not mine.

Now, this isn't a big, laborious thinking process. It's a way of looking. It's immediate. It's something that's permeating my very perceiving. It's a conception, for sure, but it's also a cutting or replacing of the usual unconscious conception, which is: this is me, this is mine. We don't often think that. We have a sense. I look at my hand—it's my hand. It's not yours. It's mine. Memory comes up as mine. I don't even have to think this, but that conception is operating naturally.

So we're just letting that more usual conception go away and replacing it with another conception: not me, not mine. That becomes the way of looking. And again, this can be extremely powerful. It's a beautiful,

beautiful practice to develop as an art, and there's lots to it. Like any practice, it has lots of subtleties and nuts and bolts, and we need to learn how to navigate it.

We can really develop it very, very beautifully. What will happen? Something similar to what we described in that practice of releasing craving. The world of appearances, the sense of self, the world of objects—even as I pay attention to them—they fade. Not because they're impermanent, but because I'm releasing the clinging. I'm releasing the clinging and I see: oh, they fade.

They don't necessarily move to this fast momentary impermanence—I'll come back to that in a second—the sense of rapid impermanence. They fade in the sense that they blur. They dissolve. They fade into white light or into blackness or whatever. They disappear.

So, for instance, paying attention again to the pain in my back or in my knees or whatever, and I'm just saying *anattā, anattā,* and maybe even the consciousness that knows this vedanā, this unpleasant vedanā—it's also *anattā, anattā*.

I develop that skill. It takes time. Really an art to develop here, and in stages usually. I've talked about it elsewhere, I'm going very quickly now.

It's not that then I see this rapid impermanence of vedanā. No, I actually see that that unpleasant vedanā will—I'm not trying to push it away with this anattā way of looking, but it's almost like it doesn't matter. I've let go of the clinging of believing it's me or mine, and the vedanā itself first goes towards, actually it might go towards pleasant, funnily enough, but eventually it goes towards neutrality.

What was unpleasant either loses its unpleasantness more and more, and may go through a stage of being actually pleasant, and eventually, if I keep doing it, even on the pleasant made, it becomes neutral. And then eventually, even those neutral sensations disappear. There's no sensation there in the knee anymore. I'm staring right at it. It's not that I'm not paying attention, I'm certainly not distracted. It's faded. It's unfabricated.

And I start to see, again, the construction of my experience and my perception and what appears to me. This practice can go really deeply in terms of how much it can deconstruct or unfabricate the world of appearances.

Then, again, based on that practice, maybe I really start to have a conviction because I see it again and again. I start to see whatever appears—whether I take it as me or mine or whatever, it is empty. Not just that it is not me and it is not mine, but it is in itself empty. It's an illusory appearance, to borrow the Buddha's terminology. It's a fabrication. It's a concoction. It's a construction. Construction dependent on the way of looking.

If I look in a certain way, the world appears and it appears very solid. If I look in other ways, it appears, but it appears much less solid. And if I look in certain ways, certain ways of looking, if I pay attention in

certain ways of looking, it does not appear. This thing that was troubling me, this thing that I loved, this thing that was neutral, fades.

This undermines, when I see this again and again, it begins to undermine—make the connections—it begins to undermine my belief in the reality of things, the reality of experiences at any level, and we're talking atomic components of experience, very rapid, the reality of anything at all. I cannot believe that they have an independent reality, independent of the way of looking. That belief that they do have an independent reality is the most fundamental level of avijjā, of delusion.

So in the tradition, especially picked up in the Mahayana tradition, clinging—this word clinging—has a much broader range of meaning than just the kind of gross obsession, hanging on to something for grim life. Just the belief that something has a reality independent of the way of looking, independent of the mind, if you like. Just that belief. And again, we don't walk around thinking about this. This is how we tend to see, how we tend to view, how we tend to experience. It's the default way of looking at a very deep level. That belief, that avijjā, is clinging.

So that clinging starts to, or rather avijjā, this basic level of delusion, of ignorance, is a form of clinging. Avijjā is grouped together with other forms of clinging.

Then I can start to actually employ another way of looking when this conviction goes through these developments, these arts, these practices, when this understanding, when I have conviction in my heart, that something in me knows—I've seen them fade, dependently on the way of looking, and I've seen how clinging and self-view constructs the fabrication, fabricates objects, constructs the appearances of seemingly solid, separate things.

When I've seen that enough, something in my heart is convinced, and I can adopt, deliberately, play with, entertain a way of looking in practice, in whatever posture in practice, that just sees things and the way of looking says empty, empty, empty—meaning I know, I don't have to have this shorthand whole thinking thing, but again, it's very fluid, very direct, very light way of looking. I know you're empty, I've seen, I know you're empty because I know that you fade when the way of looking has less avijjā in it, when there's less clinging to self-view, when I see you as not-self, or whatever it is.

So I can start to look at things and just see them as empty, empty, empty. And what happens then? An even deeper level of fading.

This applies to everything without question. The barest sense of subject, just a sense of consciousness, a momentary consciousness, or a vast, eternal-seeming awareness. Empty. Fabrication. Much less fabricated than our normal sense of consciousness or awareness, but still a fabrication. Empty.

The present moment, however brief or eternal it seems, is fabrication—empty. Whatever object appears, however vague, however light, however spacious, however transparent seeming, is empty fabrication.

And there's an even deeper fading because the avijjā is being withdrawn, being undermined in that moment.

You can go into this whole process, taking up the teaching of clinging and going deeper with your understanding of what's involved in this term clinging and how to actually work with it to not cling in the moment. You actually start to see that even attention...

To have any experience, I need to somehow pay attention to that experience. Even if it's a very open attention—I'm attending to the totality of vast awareness—there's attention there. And the mind is actually, in a subtle way, clinging. Attention works through a kind of clinging. I shut this out, so I have this experience. The mind grasps like a pair of calipers; it grasps at the object that we are paying attention to.

So even attention is a form of clinging.

These distinctions—we go back to the twelve links of dependent origination, distinguishing between craving and clinging and saṅkhāra—as we go deeper into the whole thing, the very delineations that we had started off with and that are useful at a certain level begin to blur. We see how clinging, craving, saṅkhāra, avijjā, attention—these notions overlap. They're all different forms of clinging, if you like.

Even in the examples I gave earlier, for instance, the example of fretting over hoping that this woman calls me—you can see that there's the self-view that perhaps I'm not attractive or I'm not okay somehow, and the belief that it would prove that I am okay and attractive if she called me. You can see that that avijjā is already a clinging. I'm clinging to that belief, and the sense of self there is already a kind of clinging. My trying, my tendency to view things that way, my trying to prove it—that movement to prove it is also a kind of craving, a clinging.

So even at that level, but certainly as you go deeper into this whole question in practice—you practice in these beautiful ways, very delicate, very subtle, but enormously opening in terms of the freedom and what they open in the sense of existence—you start to see that this word clinging has a huge range of subtlety. It covers a lot of ground. And as I said, all kinds of distinctions start to blur and overlap.

But essentially, I learn how to play with releasing clinging in the moment—clinging in this very broad sense at different ranges of subtlety—through playing with different ways of looking. And that develops, and I see that as I do this and let go of clinging very, very deeply, the world of appearances—self, other, world, time—is fabricated less and less.

There's a spectrum here of clinging, of self-sense, of dukkha, of sense of objects, of solidity of time. All of that is one spectrum of fabrication. And if I develop the art of this, eventually—language is difficult—eventually there can be a complete unfabricating. Nothing is fabricated at all. No subject, no object, no time—past, future or present—no space. Something that language cannot approach, except by negatives.

Through that seeing of dependent fabrication, dependent fading, dependent unfabricating, and the totality of that in an experience of the unfabricated, I understand something. All things, all experiences, all phenomena are empty. Empty meaning they do not exist independent of the mind, independent of the way of looking.

So I start with very rudimentary and simple concepts of ways of looking. There are different ways of looking at things, and they involve different kinds of clinging to different degrees, and I can see a certain amount of fabrication. And included in that idea of ways of looking is really the way of relating, the way of conceiving, the way of sensing and perceiving and framing—all kinds of things. All that's wrapped up in the way of looking.

These concepts—ways of looking and fabrication—are very simple concepts. Even a beginner in meditation, actually even someone who doesn't meditate, can see this. Every human being knows what papañca is. If you talk about papañca, every human being will recognize that. Every human being. Even someone who's not gone within ten miles of a meditation cushion knows the experience of papañca and knows the experience of coming out of papañca into a more normal state of consciousness.

Right there is a segment of this spectrum of fabrication. Papañca being much more fabricated—the self so dense, so tight, the dukkha being fabricated more intensely, and the sense of issue or object or whatever it is we're obsessing about also more intense, more real, more dense. A more normal state of consciousness—still the sense of self, very real, but less oppressive, less dense, less separate, less contracted, and similarly with the issue.

Even a beginner who's just exposed to mindfulness, maybe even on their first retreat or first course in mindfulness, gets a taste of states that involve even less fabrication than the normal state. Just a sense of even this self being less solid, less fabricated in different ways.

So even more ease than what they'd known through a normal state of consciousness.

Here we have a little spectrum: Papancha at one extreme end, the normal state of consciousness—everyday walking around consciousness—and then a state of mindfulness when it's "going quite well." Right there are three points on a spectrum, and the level of mindfulness is, of those three, the least fabricated.

This isn't rocket science. What's possible, though, is to really extend that spectrum and see how all our experience fits onto it. In a way, the whole Dharma fits onto that. The whole Dharma is saying something about this spectrum of fabrication and its relationship with clinging, and what that says about the world of appearances and their apparent reality.

So what we're really doing is taking these concepts of ways of looking and fabrication, and through practice—through experiential playing with ways of looking—we're contemplating the dependence of appearances on the mind, on the way of looking, and on clinging.

Let me return to an example: if I'm contemplating impermanence and rapid impermanence in an intense, perhaps Mahasi-style or Goenka-style practice, that's a way of looking. I'm looking at impermanence and I get into a kind of groove of seeing beginnings and endings of things. It's a way of looking that tends to fabricate what it sees in a particular manner.

I start to see process. I start to see more beginnings and endings. Appearances begin to become more fragmented, and I start to say, "Oh, now I'm seeing the atomic reality of things."

But am I? Is it the reality? Is it the ultimate reality? Or is it just a way of looking that, because I look in a certain way, conditions and fabricates what appears to me? Yes, it's less fabricated than other ways of looking, or it fabricates less than other ways of looking. But is it the end of fabrication? No. And certainly a state of mindfulness is not the end of fabrication.

As I said before, it's like: "Now there's no Papancha, there's no obsessing, I'm just with the simple experience of the pain in my chest or whatever it is, and therefore I'm not fabricating, because there's no Papancha." No. Keep open this question: what's the limit of fabrication?

This seems real. Everyone seems to talk as if these things are real—bare sensations, or if I'm in a certain culture, the atomic process of mind moments and experiences. Is that the ultimate reality? Or is that just a certain level of less fabrication?

So I keep this framework of ways of looking and fabrication, and I just see. Don't arrest that investigation. Keep playing. Is there a way that whatever I had taken to be the baseline of non-fabrication is actually still fabricated, and I can learn to unfabricate that too?

Whether it's a vast awareness, whether it's these momentary arisings and passings away of some impersonal process, whether it's just the so-called bare attention to experiences—none of that is the end of fabrication. All of those perceptions are still fabricated and we can go deeper than that.

Now, if through contemplating rapid impermanence in meditation, there is this pop that I described, or a kind of explosion, and one finds oneself suddenly—one doesn't find oneself when there's an explosion into the unfabricated, the unconditioned—then again, why is that happening?

It happened because there was enough of a release of clinging in the contemplation of rapid impermanence. The mind saw that impermanence and just let go. And it's the letting go of the clinging that unfabricates, because clinging fabricates. So letting go of clinging unfabricates. It's not the seeing of impermanence that reveals reality—it's seeing the impermanence that causes the mind to let go of the clinging, clinging in this very subtle way.

Sometimes this doesn't happen. A person is just seeing impermanence again and again, seeing impermanence again and again. But sometimes it can release the clinging at such a deep level that there is non-fabrication and there's an opening to the unfabricated.

But still I need to understand that. If I'm not seeing it in terms of ways of looking, fabrication, and clinging, I don't quite understand—as I said at the end of the first part—what is the relationship between this amazing unfabricated and this world of dukkha and appearances.

I need to understand something there.

So this way of approaching what I've just described—this way of approaching the understanding, the conception, conceiving of what the path is, the aim of non-clinging, and approaching it in practice—it has the potential of really opening up something very radical, very radically inexperienced, in terms of this spectrum into depths and depths of lessening fabrication and unfabricating. All kinds of beautiful mystical experiences are possible there, and an experience of the unfabricated as well. Both in terms of experience, a radicality, and also in terms of understanding.

You might hear this, and hopefully it at least makes a little bit of sense, but without practice it's going to be like: "This is strange. I don't know what he's talking about." It sounds either baffling or very far-fetched, or it's not the kind of thing I'm used to hearing. If I don't practice, I won't see this. If I don't practice in certain ways that allow this and make this understanding possible, I won't see this, I won't understand. And hearing about it certainly won't have much impact.

Sometimes, as I said, even practicing in certain ways doesn't have the impact because I'm not conceiving of it properly. Even if there's this opening or that opening, this experience or that falling away, it doesn't have the right impact or the impact that it could have in terms of freedom and opening up the sense of existence because I'm not conceiving it. I'm not framing it in a way that's actually helping it to do that. Maybe I'm limiting—as I said—my idea of "this is fabricated and this is not fabricated," and I put a bottom limit to my exploration. Maybe I'm just not conceiving in terms of reality rather than in terms of ways of looking, and that's creating a wall that I can't go beyond. Or I'm not conceiving in terms of fabrication in a full enough way, or even at all.

This teaching—the Buddha's central teaching, the Four Noble Truths—says there is dukkha and it arises from clinging, from craving, as its cause, and there's the release of that, and there are ways to move towards releasing it. The shorthand version is just: craving causes dukkha, clinging causes dukkha, and there's the possibility of releasing it. And the teaching of dependent origination is a sort of more detailed explanation of that.

There's actually an analogy for that. Perhaps we find ourselves—we don't know how we got there—we wake up and we are somehow, we realize, locked inside some kind of dark, semi-dark, I don't know, a big castle or something. There are just all these corridors and stairwells and doors, some of them open and some of them locked, and we don't know where we are. How on earth do we get out?

Then we're given a map, maybe a map and one of those adjustable wrenches—you know, you can make it larger or smaller depending on the bolt that you're trying to undo. Looking at the map, I try and decipher

what's going on. I start to see, oh, I'm not even on the right floor. The doors to get out are on the ground floor, and I'm stuck on the third floor. So how do I even get down to the ground floor? Some doors are open, other doors on the way to the ground floor I need to unscrew with my adjustable wrench, et cetera, et cetera. Eventually, through all these things, I find my way out. I find one of the doors and I can unscrew that and it actually leads to the fresh air, the daylight, the freedom of the outside—a completely different experience.

So the Buddha's teaching of dependent origination is, if you like, a map—the map of the inside of that castle. I can locate myself and then I can start moving in these ways. And the teachings about clinging are like that adjustable wrench, so I can actually undo the imprisonment.

That's not such a good analogy. It's a little too gothic, and there are lots of reasons why it's not such a good analogy. For a start, it turns out that the whole castle and imprisonment is a bit of an illusion. Anyway, the point is that the teaching of clinging is a tool, and with skill we unlock something that has to do more with understanding—understanding the dependent arising of appearances, the fabrication of the appearances of self, other, world, time, space, etc., the emptiness of these things.

Maybe it wasn't such a good analogy. Never mind. But the fact is that the teaching of clinging as a tool is a key.

The teaching "don't try to repeat experiences" can be skillful at times because we can cling and get too constricted trying to repeat experiences. But actually, in a way, we need to see this many times. We need to see this dependent fabrication and dependent fading many, many times because there's such a deep level of delusion entrenched there for us to believe in the reality of things. Of course this "I." Of course this object in front of me. Of course this feeling, this sensation, or whatever it is. Of course time.

Of course, these are real things. They exist independently of the mind.

We need to see many, many times this fading, very specifically through the release of cravings. So it's not that we're grasping at experiences so much, it's that we want to repeat certain experiences, including the difficult ones. We don't need to repeat them intentionally, because we have them anyway. But we want to see our experience going up and down on this spectrum of fabrication dependent on clinging. I see that many, many times, until it becomes something in my heart that knows the emptiness of all things.

So if I don't understand in this sense, then the teaching "just let go of everything" won't be very deeply liberating. Just let go of everything. I can hear that, and probably many people do hear that, in a way that presumes a certain level of realism—the independent reality of what we're not clinging to. So just let go of this or that. I believe in this and that, and somehow I'm letting go of it. Or there's some level of reality that remains. I can see that there's some construction, some fabrication, but there's some level of reality—maybe that atomistic reductionism. There's just this process of events, of consciousness and perception and vedanā and all that. And I believe that level of reality remains.

And then you get teachings which conflate impermanence and emptiness. So in that way of limited understanding, just to say that the self is empty means it's nothing but impermanent moments, or to say that of anything. But emptiness is saying something much deeper than impermanence, much more radical.

Or again, we might say, "Oh, just let go of anything. Just being and just receiving." When I'm doing that, I'm not engaging a way of looking. I'm just receiving purely. I'm just being. I'm not trying. I'm not doing any way of looking. Oftentimes people hear about this way of looking—"Oh, that's interesting"—and then sometimes I just want to rest and not do, and not have a way of looking. There's always a way of looking.

So if we don't understand this teaching deeply enough, some level of realism—which is basically delusion, avijjā—remains. And then we believe in things like the atomistic reductionism perception, or we believe that I can do something called "just being," and that that's not doing, or that I can just receive, or whatever. I can somehow have a mode of being that has no way of looking.

So somehow I have to pick up this teaching of non-clinging, of letting go, of what it means to let go of everything. I have to approach it in a certain way. I'm not trying to live without clinging. I'm trying to use the teaching of clinging and dependent arising and fabrication and ways of looking—all of which are intimately linked with each other. And that functions as this adjustable wrench, this map, this tool, key, if you like, to unlock something.

Now actually, I can't live without clinging, because when I start—this is curious now, and again, without the experience of this, and without understanding a certain way, this is going to sound bizarre—but I can't live without clinging, because clinging is a part of perceiving, experiencing anything. As I said, it's part of attention. And when I really let go of clinging very deeply, in that moment, appearances do not appear. There is no perception. If I really just let go of everything, the world does not appear. Self, world, time do not appear.

So this is interesting. And this actually—I don't know if people, it seems to me most people are not aware of this—but this actually caused a huge conundrum in the history of Buddhism. How does an arahant, and how does a Buddha, fully enlightened, therefore supposedly no avijjā, no cravings, how do they perceive anything? Perception is part of the fourth link of dependent arising, what's called nāma-rūpa. And if there's no avijjā, and there's no craving, then actually perception does not arise. As I said, you can experience that in meditation and know it for a fact in meditation.

So someone says, "Well, the arahant or a Buddha has a residual amount of kind of karmic momentum that enables them to have appearances, etc. But at their death, their final nirvana, that is dissolved and so they're not reborn again. The world of perception is not reborn for them. There's total unbinding of the world of perception."

When it came to the Mahāyāna, historically, a few hundred years after the Buddha's death, this was then,

even that explanation was a problem.

Because for a number of reasons, when it came to the question of a Buddha's compassionate return—if a Buddha was devoted to appearing again and again, being reborn to serve suffering beings out of compassion—how could they possibly have appearances? You understand the dilemma? They have no avijja, they have no craving. Yet avijja and craving, clinging, are needed for the fabrication of appearances.

From a certain perspective, this paradox became the basis for a whole complex elaboration of Mahayana philosophy. I don't think it's that simple, because the Mahayana had many profound insights beyond merely trying to solve the problem of how a Buddha could return. In the Theravada understanding, once a Buddha is gone, they're gone—they don't get reborn. Arahants don't get reborn.

In Mahayana teaching, there's a doctrine that only a Buddha—not even an Arahant—can contemplate the full emptiness of things and have appearances at the same time. As I explained in the practices, for someone who's not a Buddha, which includes an Arahant, when they lean heavily into attending to something—whatever it is, a sensation, a perception—if in their very attending to that object they're using a way of looking that also knows thoroughly the emptiness of that object, then that object fades.

Either everything fades when they fully contemplate emptiness, or they have to shift into a mode where they're not leaning so much on that insight of emptiness. This residual avijja, this kind of default avijja, reasserts itself so that they can have appearances. If you're listening, this may sound abstract, but it's quite remarkable. If you know this level of practice and understand it a certain way, you see this is true. I cannot have a full leaning on the insight of emptiness at the same time as I have the appearance of an object. It will fade to the degree that I lean on, that I allow the fullness of that knowing of its emptiness into the way of looking.

Only a Buddha, the teaching says, is able to see both—to fully know the emptiness and have the appearance of things simultaneously. This might seem like a strange, abstruse, abstract Mahayana teaching, but there are reasons for it.

One way of conceiving Vajrayana practice, tantric practice, is that it's a kind of—and I use this word in a positive sense—faking of a Buddha mind. We allow our insight of the emptiness of whatever we're perceiving to pervade the way of looking, but in a lighter way, so that the object becomes relatively transparent. I know its emptiness, but I'm not leaning on that insight into emptiness so much that it actually fades.

It's playing with walking a tightrope—keeping appearances around while seeing them, knowing them as empty. If I lean too much on that insight of emptiness while looking at an object, not going away from the object but knowing its emptiness, that object will fade. Tantric practice involves much more than this—and we'll return to this—but one aspect is this faking of the Buddha mind that can fully know

emptiness and have appearances simultaneously.

The point is: we cannot live without clinging because clinging is part of perception. Clinging is necessary for perception. Very subtle levels of clinging are necessary for perception.

On top of that, clinging is empty too. Clinging has no inherent existence. This is something really emphasized by all the great Mahayana teachers—Nagarjuna, Chandrakirti, you name it. They say there's no grasper to be found, no self grasping. There is no object of grasping to be found. Neither is grasping to be found. All these are empty. All these are void. All these are illusory. There are countless statements to these facts, countless instances of these declarations. No grasper. No grasped, no grasping. No clinger, no clung to, no clinging. They are empty. They are illusory.

When you put all this together, you start to have a different understanding of the whole thing. It opens up different possibilities and certainly a different level of understanding. Don't cling to non-clinging. It's empty and wrapped up in perception. Don't cling to the idea of non-clinging.

This is strange now. There is space for clinging. Because I know it's empty, because I know it's part of perception, part of the magic of appearances, there's space for clinging. Clinging is given permission, if you like.

So achieving the end of craving doesn't mean that I'm living in some way without craving. What would that mean if craving is part of perception? It doesn't mean that. It means seen and understood is this relationship between craving, clinging, fabrication, and the lessening of craving, and the lessening of fabrication, and the dissolution of craving temporarily, and the opening into the unfabricated.

And all this implies, as I said, the emptiness of everything—the self, of the mind, of consciousness, awareness, whatever word you want to use for it, of objects, of world, of space, of time, of clinging. Everything. Empty. Fabricated. Illusory.

I can go even beyond that level of understanding. Something happens in approaching it this way, in seeing it this way, in understanding something that opens up the sense of existence—mystical opening of the whole sense of existence, radically different sense. I'm no longer being in this world that seems pretty real and attempting to try and live without clinging. Free to crave, free to play with different degrees of craving in my ways of looking, free to fabricate more or less.

There's skill here, art actually—free to engage the art of fabrication, to let it go completely quiet, to fabricate in different ways, to different degrees. This becomes part of the practice because I understand something. So I can fabricate a little, I can fabricate a lot, I can go into the unfabricated.

So then, what we might call simple mindfulness or bare attention and the experience of the vividness of things and the simplicity of things. And sometimes what people call the suchness of things, when they just feel like, "I'm just so present, everything's so bright, it just is what it is."

Incidentally, that word suchness actually means completely the opposite of that in the tradition. It means the emptiness of things, that they are not what they appear to be. They are exactly not what they appear to be. Just this, just that, exactly as it is. Suchness means emptiness, means their lack of inherent existence, means that they are not anything in particular. They are fabricated. They are illusory. They are not like this or like that. Strange reversal of meaning that's happened historically, especially in the West. There are different reasons for that, but we won't go into that now.

But that level of, that state of mind and that level of experience of what we call mindfulness or bare attention, the vividness that comes with that and the beauty that comes with that—that's just a certain level of less fabrication than normal. If I'm hanging out in what some people call big mind or vast awareness or whatever, that too is one degree of less fabrication, but it's still fabricated in a certain direction, this beautiful vastness, big mind, everything just arising out of that vastness, disappearing back into it, lovely mystical state. It's one degree of less fabrication—it's a certain direction of fabrication.

Or if I'm seeing this rapid impermanence, this atomistic process arising, passing, arising, passing, again, it's just one degree, it's a certain degree of less fabrication and in a certain direction, fabricating according to the way of looking, just like the vast awareness. And I can go much deeper states of much less fabrication, much deeper unfabricating than either of those—either the vast awareness or this atomistic process, much deeper.

But even through really deep unfabrication—some of you might have heard of the formless jhanas. These are available experiences. The realm of nothingness, the realm of neither perception nor non-perception, the seventh and the eighth jhanas, these deep states of unfabricating, of less fabrication. And even beyond that. As I said, to the unfabricated. The unconditioned. The unborn. The deathless.

And what happens, as I said, is then I can fabricate all these different directions and many more, actually infinite possibilities of fabrication, many, many more than that, in different directions and different degrees and the whole art of fabrication, if you like. And that spectrum opens up for me and the directions of artful fabrication open up as practice, as play, all to do with ways of looking and fabrication.

So living without clinging is not the point of the Dharma. But understanding, seeing the dependent origination, the dependent fading, the fabrication, the dependent fabrication dependent on clinging, and through that seeing the emptiness of things—these are interchangeable meanings, the emptiness of all things. This is the point of the Dharma, and it opens so much up.

Actually, even this teaching of dependent origination, all those links, we start to understand in a way that that very teaching starts to melt itself. Those links, they melt, they overlap, they blur, they fade. We see they're not real things either. And again, the Mahāyāna made this very clear: All twelve links of dependent origination are illusions.

They're fabricated, they're empty, they're not real. Again, choose your terminology—you can find many

instances of this absolutely insisted upon. The teaching of dependent origination, the twelve links, is not a reality. This is a tool. This is a key that then dissolves itself, melts itself—that whole chain—in experience as we open to the Unfabricated, but also in understanding, because we understand these are not real things. We're not talking about separate things. We're not talking about elements, real elements or components of a real process here.

There's an incredible skillfulness of the Buddha in finding concepts that we can pick up and use as ways of looking. And if we approach it in that spirit, we begin to see that the very ways of looking lead to other ways of looking. The whole thing dissolves itself and opens up a freedom of experience, but also a freedom of understanding. It comes with understanding.

So we can hear teachings and assume that what we're hearing—or conclude from what we're hearing or reading, or in some instances we're actually taught—that the Dharma is, the point is, the aim is: try to be in the world without craving or without clinging. Be kind, but because everything's impermanent, try to be in the world without craving, without clinging, and you will suffer less. There's obviously some truth to that.

But what if we understand the Dharma and approach these teachings of dependent origination, dependent fading, fabrication, ways of looking, Four Noble Truths, clinging—all of that—as keys that unlock, that unbind the apparent nature of reality and reveal everything as empty, reveal the world as empty, as magical illusions? And that's the point of Dharma. And what that then allows for us becomes the point and the aim of the Dharma.

Because then, as I said, we can shape perception. We can fabricate in different ways. This self is empty. I know that thoroughly. There's no self-view at all—not process, not atoms, not big awareness, not nothing. Any self-view is empty, is fabrication. I can therefore shape this empty self in different ways. I can fabricate different kinds of selves, fabricate different kinds of appearances of the world, of others, all kinds of things, of time, through the art of practice. And there's a huge range there.

The selves that I know are illusory, that I know are fabrications, that I fabricate deliberately and skillfully as art—they don't have to be constrained to look a certain way. I don't always have to look calm, especially as I'm a meditation teacher, or because I'm a Buddhist. I don't always have to look unexcited. That's a certain fabrication of self. If I know it's illusory, well, there's a lot more room to play with. There's a lot more dressing up, a lot more garments to try on, to have fun in the magic clothes shop changing room.

This is really important to me, and it makes a huge difference in what we even consider the Dharma to be or where we're going. Actually, I'll just throw in one more thing to point out: most letting go and most non-clinging actually involves clinging to another object. And there's no problem with this—it's just that almost inevitably, this is how we don't cling. People say "just let go, just let go," as if we do that independently of clinging to something else.

Someone who's been addicted to alcohol or drugs—talk to someone who's been through that and come out the other end. They didn't just let go. There was a process there where they actually clung, and sometimes for dear life, they clung to something that was more wholesome. Maybe they clung to a certain ethical principle—the fifth precept or whatever—through the support of the Sangha. They clung to their sila. Maybe to fellowship, a twelve-step fellowship. Maybe even they took on the identity: "I am—my name is X, and I am an addict, I am an alcoholic." And that clinging to a certain identity was absolutely necessary in letting go of the addictions.

In Buddhism and all kinds of approaches—whether secularly conceived or religiously conceived—and in all kinds of other religions, actually a person is able to let go because effectively they're clinging to a faith, some faith in something or other, again, whether that's a secularly conceived faith or a religiously conceived faith.

Actually, the clinging to the faith and the vision of the faith and what that faith holds out enables them to let go of this or that.

So there are examples from practice that I described earlier in this talk. In this anatta way of looking, that incredible depth and beauty of letting go is allowed because effectively or realistically I'm clinging to the view, the way of looking of anatta. I'm clinging to this way of looking, seeing everything that comes up while staying in that groove of deliberately—very subtly, but deliberately—lightly seeing things as not-self. So I'm effectively clinging to an insight in order to let go at a much deeper level.

Or even when I say I'm in a state of letting go or resting in awareness—some people use that phrase—or "I'm just receiving, I'm just open to things"—that's still a way of looking, as I emphasized before. It's not that there's no way of looking. There's certainly a way of looking there, replete with all kinds of subtle conceptuality and a certain relationship with things, a certain mode, replete with doing. Please don't think that that state—it's a relatively less doing—still involves doing. But I'm effectively clinging to that doing, and that conception, and that way of looking, in order that it enables a letting go.

I think it was one of my teacher's teachers, Ajahn Dhammadaro, a Thai forest monk in Thailand who died quite young. I think it was him that used this analogy: the Dharma and practice are like a ladder. When you're climbing a ladder, for your feet to let go of the bottom rung, first you need to put your feet on the bottom rung. Then to let go of the bottom rung, actually, your hands grip another rung, or your one foot grips or finds a basis in the next rung. Your hands probably, unless you're trying to do it with your hands, something's gripping something higher or more subtle. And in this way, we go.

If we take the addiction example, clinging to sila is a more refined clinging than clinging to alcohol. Clinging to anatta is much more refined than clinging to self-view—"this is me, this is mine"—in its even unconscious way. And then even clinging to the view of anatta, even clinging to the view of emptiness.

So there's a way where the process of non-clinging develops through clinging to something else. We don't

just let go. Again, we're so attracted by the simplicity, the seeming simplicity of that statement. But like with a ladder, eventually you reach the last rung and you can let go. You can let go of the ladder, or the Buddha's analogy of the raft crossing the stream. You can let go of the ladder, the raft. But it happens progressively at more and more subtle levels.

If I don't have ways of looking and ways of clinging to more subtle things, this idea of "just let go of everything" really is pretty silly and will just end up either with complete frustration or blindness to what I'm clinging to, or just this kind of resignation: "Oh well, what are you going to do? Maybe the real masters somewhere living in caves can do something, but basically the rest of us just have to put up with our delusion and our clinging. We try and let go of the grosser clingings and we laugh at ourselves."

But much more is possible.

So it doesn't make sense, as I said, to live without craving or clinging, because it's involved in the fabrication of perception. It's involved in experiencing anything. But as I said at the beginning of the last talk, there's a second problem. There's a second problem with this ideal of living without clinging, in addition to what I've said in this talk.

Would we even really, deep down, want to? It's not to do with delusion, but is it what the depths of the heart and the being really want? What would it even look like, really?

This is what I want to explore a little bit.

Thank you for listening.

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