

Greed (4 of 5) Composting Greed

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Welcome to the fourth talk on greed. Today's talk is going to be about composting greed or letting it become transformed. This idea did not originate with me. In Buddhism, this is sometimes seen as an advanced practice. It is best not to do this practice of composting greed in a way that allows the old habits of mind and self to come along and easily entangle us. This is why it is really important to have a strong foundation in basic mindfulness practice, with a strong clear recognition of desire, greed, or wanting, where there is a little bit of freedom, a bit of distancing, or opening in relation to what's going on.

When it is practiced with vipassana, this clear recognition often involves a recognition of the details of experience. Rather than lumping experience altogether in one big amorphous idea of what something is, we

start seeing the components of it: the bodily expressions, the emotional aspects, the motivational aspects, and the cognitive aspects. As each becomes more highlighted and seen as distinct, then the amorphous whole doesn't grab us as much, and we don't get so reactive to it, caught in it, or greedy about it. We start seeing the underlying conditionality of experience and its underlying changing nature in a very powerful way.

This is a core aspect of vipassana practice. It is tremendously valuable – something to love and care for. It is so liberating. Sometimes clear recognition is a little bit like, for example, taking a good look and really recognizing what a bicycle is. You look at the bicycle, and you get your tools out, and you begin taking apart all the pieces of the bicycle, separating them, unscrewing everything, and laying it all out on the ground so you can really see what a bicycle is.

It is fascinating to see that, maybe, but when you do it, the thing that was the bicycle no longer rolls – it no longer works as a bicycle. In order to let a bicycle be a bicycle, you don't take it apart. You have to let all the pieces stay together and work in harmony, and then allow it to roll.

Sometimes that is also true for our inner life, with desire and greed. Sometimes, if we take the deeper look of

vipassana, or if we get deeply concentrated and bypass the desire or greed, then the rolling of the bicycle (the greed) has been interrupted. Doing this can give us tremendous safety. Being caught and involved in greed can cause so much damage to us and others. It is very stressful, alienating, and disconnecting. Being caught in greed can lend itself to assertiveness and aggressiveness that objectifies others or doesn't really see others as human. We bulldoze over people because our greed or desire is more important than other people's welfare. What can happen in this world through the assault of people's desire and greed is so horrible.

But we can learn how to have clear recognition and how not to be involved or entangled in greed. Then we have the opportunity to compost it. What I mean by "composting" is to not be caught in greed, but also not interrupt it or interfere with it. This does not mean being deeply analytical or becoming concentrated, changing the inner landscape so dramatically that greed is not there. Rather, to let the greed be – allow it to be there. One way to allow greed to be there that is safe – that protects us from getting caught up in greed's thoughts, ideas, and goals – is to feel it in the body. This is why I call it "composting in the body."

As I said before, this is an advanced practice. But it's not necessarily only for more mature practitioners. It is

also for people who have no other option because the greed is so strong that it will take over if they don't do something. Maybe they have no access to deep mindfulness. So instead, we just come back to the body, feeling greed in the body and grounding it in the body over and over again. We allow greed to move through in an embodied way, feeling its momentum, its movement, and its urges.

Grounding in the body accomplishes a number of things. First, it takes us away from the thoughts, ideas, and hopes in the mind that are often what is compelling greed and feeding it. All by itself grounding in the body also takes us a little bit away from the emotions. It allows whatever emotions are connected to greed to be grounded in the physical body here. The body gives greed a root in the present moment. The body is always present.

Also, as we start feeling the sensations and the impulses of greed in the body when we meditate with our body, our perception of the body becomes in some ways bigger than what we think of as our body. There is lots of space in the body. We allow the momentum of greed and desire to course through the body, and we keep opening space to it, allowing it to be there. What I am talking about now is best done in meditation, where we are committed to not moving and not acting on greed. We sit there and just let the greed course

through our body, feeling the sensations of it. When we get out of the way of greed this way, without acting on it or getting involved in it, then there is a composting – a transformation, a change – that goes on.

This change is akin to the way the body can be self-healing at times. Sometimes when we get sick or we injure ourselves, if we allow for the right conditions, maybe by keeping a wound clean or having a cast on a broken arm so the bones line up again, then the body has an amazing ability to find its way to health and healing.

It is the same way with emotions, desires, and greed. Greed is a little bit like being sick – an illness. Our system knows how to move to health if we create the right conditions for that. One of the right conditions is to not act on it, not be compelled by it to do anything, but also not to push it away or stop it from moving through and coursing through our body. As we do this, as we get out of the way and allow greed to be here, then something begins to shift and change, or simply settles. Sometimes it changes into something a little different. There are layers in our inner life, and we go through those layers.

For example, in some circumstances, greed might be a symptom of something deeper that is going on inside of us. As we do this composting, this transforming,

allowing greed to be there, that deeper thing begins to show itself and to bubble up as well. And that is much more important. For example, some greed might be a symptom of fear. We are afraid of something, and we really want something because we think that is going to make us safe.

Or we might have very strong lust, even sexual lust, but when we look underneath it, there is a deep loneliness. That deep loneliness is looking desperately for something that we think is going to fill it and take care of it – a powerful assurance that we're not alone and that someone connects to us. So we think sexual engagement is the ticket. Instead, we can feel the deep fear that might be there, or the loneliness or anger that might be underneath greed. Sometimes there is a strong anger that propels us to want to do something, maybe even something harmful.

So we go through the layers. For example, if there's fear, underneath that fear there might be a sense of vulnerability or tenderness. We might have a sense of hurt, or there might be a deeper, quieter fear that doesn't really have an object, but is more existential.

As we go through the layers, and allow the feelings to be there, then the transformation and composting begin to happen – the movement toward health. But it often requires going through these layers and discovering

what is here. The idea here is, in a sense, that greed is just a surface manifestation, a symptom of something else. So don't act on the symptom. Don't kill the symptom – it is just a messenger. But sit quietly and allow it so you can hear and see more deeply what is really going on inside of you – so you can connect more deeply and allow the deeper movements and revelations of what is really happening here to show themselves.

A composting, a transformation is going on. Occasionally, that transformation, with something like desire and greed, is that we see greed is a kind of wanting something just like compassion is. In Buddhism, faith is a kind of desire for freedom. As we go deeper and deeper down, we start finding that part of the transformation might be the discovery of appropriate, beautiful, healthy desires that are always there at the base, but we've never figured out how to express them, live them, or trust them. The self or the ego, or the care of protecting ourselves, or our anxiety around things, or all the cultural beliefs we have around self and others can come into play so quickly. They obscure the deep, beautiful kind of desire that compassion is, or that which the movement towards liberation might be.

When feelings are strong, the best way to compost them is by always returning to the body. When greed is

strong, it might keep coming back. There might be thoughts as part of it, but we just allow all of it to be here. This is like, “Come back, be here with it,” and then be here with it. Just keep coming back, keep coming back. It is as if you are turning over the compost pile so that it can keep decomposing properly. You are turning yourself over, coming back, feeling the body, feeling the body, feeling the body. If you keep doing that, it is a protection against getting involved in the thoughts, the ideas, and the desires. Just don’t get involved. Stay here, stay here.

If what I said today doesn’t make sense to you, or is confusing, then maybe just ignore it. As I said, it is an advanced practice. Maybe it will become clear later. Trust the basic practice of mindfulness. It’s so powerful, so effective, so useful and meaningful. Trust it. When the time comes, you might get some sense of what I mean when I talk about composting. Thank you very much.