

Greed (2 of 5) Understanding Greed

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This is going to be the second talk on greed. In this one, I'll try to talk a little bit about what the word "greed" means. It is a very important concept in Buddhist practice, not least because freedom from greed is one of the aspects of spiritual liberation that Buddhism points to as a possibility for us. So it is important to understand what greed is so we can work through it and get to the other side.

But it might be a little difficult for me to talk about greed. This might be because of the associations I have with the word; maybe other people have them too. To explain more specifically, in my history with Theravada Buddhism, I sometimes felt that greed was disrespected – that greed was considered to be all bad, and therefore

the goal was to get rid of greed. If it was there, it was negative; it was something wrong with us. Greed was almost like the closest thing to sin. Having greed was seen as an impurity. In fact, the tradition talks about greed as being impure.

I think we have to be very careful to consider that what we translate as “greed” is multifaceted, and it is integrated with and connected to many different aspects of our lives. Some of these are very healthy and important, while some of them will cause us suffering. We don’t want to throw away the baby with the bathwater – we don’t want to hold the idea of greed as simply bad, therefore let’s get rid of it. It is important to take a deeper look and understand what it is. Whatever we associate with the word greed, we don’t want to judge it negatively, disrespect it, condemn it, or condemn ourselves because of it. In mindfulness practice, we want to take a good deep look at it and really find out: what is greed for us? How does greed work? What is it connected to? What is greed trying to do? Is there anything valuable underneath or as part of what we call “greed”?

There are two words sometimes translated as “greed,” which belong in the triad of greed, hatred, and delusion. Sometimes the word *raga* is used for greed, and sometimes the word *lobha*. *Raga* has more to do with sensual desires – the desire for sensual pleasures. This

desire is not just a dime a dozen – for example, “Oh, it’d be nice to have pleasant food; it would be nice to have a soft bed to sleep in; it’d be nice to have all kinds of things.” But there is a compulsion with *raga*.

Some people will translate the word *raga* as “lust,” and others will translate it as “passion.” People have different associations with these two words, so some of the words don’t work very well as a translation of greed, and they might not really work for something that is generally seen as negative. So there is some variability and choice about what words to use.

But the word *raga* has to do with sensual pleasures. We know that some people have a tremendous intensity of desire and sensual pleasure, for example, with addictions and cravings. There can be a strong compulsion to be involved in that world. Some people lose themselves and cause a tremendous amount of suffering in life because of it. They very quickly regret what they’ve done, because that pleasure in the moment hurt other people or hurt them in some deep way. Alcohol and drug use can result from the drive for pleasure. But it doesn’t really provide happiness – it causes alienation.

For human beings, sensual pleasures play a huge role in their lives. How can we be involved with them in a wise, liberated way, so we are free in relation to sensual

pleasures, but do not dismiss them or feel that we're not allowed to experience them? How do we experience them without the suffering and pain that come with being compelled to search for, hold on to, or cling to sensual pleasures?

The other word is *lobha*. *Lobha* has more to do with acquiring things – getting and obtaining things. Here there is a whole slew of things that do not necessarily directly involve sensual pleasure, such as wanting money, wanting material things, wanting fame, or wanting praise. *Lobha* is a strong desire for things. When either of these intense desires is strong, we can get caught in their realm, in their web.

The Buddha used the metaphor of catching monkeys to emphasize the idea of getting caught. Apparently, hunters in his time used a kind of pitch, pine tar, or sap that was very sticky. They would put some on a stick, with food attached to the stick, on top of a pole. The monkey would come along, climb up the pole, and grab onto the stick to get the food. It would put its hand on the pitch, and then it couldn't pull its hand free. So it would use the other hand to push itself off the pole, but the other hand would get stuck in the pitch. Then it would use a foot to try to get the two hands free, and the foot would get stuck. Then it would use the second foot for the same thing, and get stuck again. In this metaphor, the Buddha said that the monkey then took

its nose and pushed against the stick, but the nose got stuck. With all five body parts stuck to the pitch, the hunter could just walk right up and pick up the monkey. The poor monkey had been caught.

When greed – *lobha* or *raga* – is strong, we get caught in the web or the pitch of what we want. Sometimes we are inflamed with desires, and we can't think of anything but getting what we want.

But one reason to respect greed is that greed sometimes has deeper roots inside of us. There are reasons for it. Sometimes the pursuit of very strong desire comes from deep conditionality – some deep hurt, suffering, fear, or distress that is trying to find a way to be healed, cared for, distracted from, or compensated for. If we simply let go of or throw away greed too quickly and dismiss it, we don't see that it is a symptom of some deeper desire.

Not all desires are wrong. Some desires are attempts to move towards health and to care for ourselves. But sometimes they get misdirected in ways that can be harmful, disconnecting, or alienating. So we stop and take a look at greed – this intense desire – to see what else is going on here. Let's stop, and not dismiss it, not disrespect it. Let's think of it as something that really needs to be seen, to be heard, and to be connected to.

Rather than having greed be a source of disconnection, where we are disconnected from ourselves, but are trapped or connected to the pitch – to the spider’s web – and can’t get away, instead, let’s find a connection to greed that allows us to have a deepening experience of ourselves. What that involves is turning the attention around 180 degrees from the object of greed to what it’s like to be greedy – what greed feels like here in the body. The movement from the alienation caused by greed when we’re focused on its object can be turned around to create the opposite of alienation: a connectedness here.

One thing to study in greed so we really know for ourselves is the way that, when we’re involved and caught in it, greed does not really feel like it is for our own welfare, because it leads to alienation and causes suffering. In the teachings of the Buddha, greed always involves suffering. There is always some kind of distress, stress, or some kind of “ouch” for us in having greed.

One reason to discover the ways that greed is stressful – the underlying suffering or problems with the experience of greed – is so we can discover a different kind of desire: a healthy desire that has no suffering and no distress involved in it. This kind of desire does not diminish us, limit us, or trap us, but does the opposite. It

nourishes us, frees us, and opens us. There are such desires.

So just because we're looking here at greed, and we see that greed is problematic, does not mean that we should dismiss it. We should respect greed and look into it deeply to discover what is really happening under the surface. Then we should search for other forms of desire that can animate our life that are freeing, healthy, and appropriate to have. This is the task of mindfulness practice in relation to greed.

Tomorrow, I will talk more about turning the attention around 180 degrees and practicing with greed by looking at it in a deeper way. Maybe you won't want to use the word "greed" if it doesn't really resonate, or if you think of it only as intense desire. But today, for the next 24 hours, study greed in small ways – the small compulsions, the small ways you are compelled by desire. Study what you are compelled by, and where you lose your freedom around desire. This could be as simple as going for seconds, or going for a cookie – all those things you do where you can't help yourself and are pushed around by desire, and, in that, lose your freedom. I hope you enjoy the exploration of greed, and I hope that you become a better person because of it. Thank you.