

**The Way of Non-Clinging (Part 1)**  
**Eros Unfettered – Opening the Dharma of Desire**  
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**January 15, 2017**  
<https://dharmafeed.org/teacher/210/talk/40190/>

What I would like to do tonight is give a talk that in some ways could just stand alone, talking about non-clinging. But in other ways (and this is my main purpose, really), hopefully give something in a way that serves or gives a kind of preface, if you like, to the set of talks that we're going to start around the alchemy of desire, around eros and practice. So a kind of preface – a slightly strange preface, but 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. So 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.

That's 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, 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, if you like, 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, if you like, 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 a context, begin to contrast some different large-scale understandings, and where they might lead, or what they might block off. Actually, I think I've pretty much talked about all of this before, and certainly written about much of it, and I don't particularly like to repeat myself. I don't see the point if it's already out there, generally, [and] would rather move on to new stuff. So a lot of this will be quite brief. Also, not all of this, but 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, certainly at 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, the early teachings of the Buddha, the historical Buddha, we find a lot of different words, like English, a lot of different words – like English, we have passion, desire, craving, greed, clinging, grasping. Many words. English is a very rich language. And similarly in Pali, in the language of the Buddha, we have a word like *rāga*, which actually is meaning 'to colour' or 'to dye.' The colouring, 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: the passion colours something. When we colour things red, we become impassioned, or passion also

colours things, so there's a link there. But there's this word *rāga*, usually translated as 'passion' or 'lust.' *Kāma* can have two meanings. One is 'the object of sensual enjoyment.' The *object*, so something that is sensually pleasing. But also 'sense desire.' The verb *kāmeti* means 'to desire' or 'to crave.' There's the word *lobha*, which can be translated as 'greed.' *Gedha*, 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 *hitacchanda*. That's 'the effort to do good.' *Hita* is what's 'useful,' or 'suitable,' or 'beneficial,' or 'friendly.' So when we talk, for example, in *mettā* practice, about well-wishing or doing good in the world, it's *hitacchanda*. *Chanda* is really 'impulse' or 'intention' or 'will.' It could be 'virtuous.' It could be 'a virtue' or '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 intention, or it *can* be good, and words like *rāga*, *kāma*, *lobha*, etc., these are negative words: they lead to suffering, they are unskilful, etc.

However, there are also plenty of instances in the Pali Canon where, for instance, Sāriputta, in the *Samyutta Nikāya*, says, "*Chandarāga*, desire and lust, these are fetters."<sup>1</sup> Okay? So *chanda* there is not qualified; he's just saying it's a fetter. There are words like *taṇhā*, which is usually translated as 'craving,' and *upādāna*, 'clinging,' usually translated, or 'attachment.' This is quite an interesting word, because it also 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*, *taṇhā*, *gedha*, *rāga*, *lobha*, passion, lust, craving, desire, etc., clinging. All fetters, *saṃyojanāni*, which means 'fetter,' like 'yoke,' like an oxen that's ploughing a field has a yoke to pull that on. It's something that imprisons.

And the Buddha talks about different fetters, and in the process, in the stages of enlightenment, how different fetters are 'eradicated,' is really the word that he uses. So *kāmacchanda*, or 'sensual desire,' is eradicated at the third stage of awakening, and at full awakening, full enlightenment, arahantship, the *rāga*, *rūparāga*, or 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 *arūparāga*, 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,' *uddhata*, '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? That's 'restlessness,' sometimes, usually translated as *uddhacca*. That's also eradicated.

As I say, we could make distinctions here. One of the distinctions it's quite common to make these days is between 'craving' (*taṇhā*) and 'clinging' (*upādāna*), so that 'craving' is the momentary impulse to have something or to get away from something. 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, then 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 ways to get it, etc. There's a consolidation, a tightening, a reinforcing, a solidification that's happening.

So, 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. 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 of it 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 texts, you see how much overlap there really is between all these words. And historically, you know, the twelve links of dependent origination – so *taṇhā* 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, there's good evidence they were taken from a Vedic creation hymn/myth that pre-existed the Buddha by a long time.<sup>2</sup> There would have been a concept, that whole twelve links, 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 he used it in a very different way, pointed in a very different direction. 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.<sup>3</sup> Other times he adds ones; they overlap. 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, sometimes it's helpful, and 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 part two of this talk, I want to go into, actually explain more in detail, a very important practical reason or reason for practice and for insight, why differentiating, for example, between craving and clinging is actually not that helpful sometimes, [and] in fact doesn't actually make sense, the deeper we go into practice. But for now, actually, let's respect that distinction that's there with those different words, and very briefly kind of 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 kind of looking at the anatomy of that whole process of clinging, craving, desire, and the way it leads to suffering. So we could pick any example, really, all kinds of things: what happens when we see chocolate cake, looks very enticing, and the whole process that happens there, could happen inside us. So 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 a delusion, *avijjā* in the Pali, delusion or ignorance. Really, in this case, one aspect of that ignorance is

not really getting it, not really understanding: “This is bad for me. This is not healthy. This will cause suffering in the future to my health.” I know two friends who have family members really, really seriously ill with emphysema after years of smoking. Something much earlier on, it *knows* this is bad for us, doesn’t really get it – the *avijjā* is too thick there, too entrenched. So not really understanding.

There’s *saṅkhārā*, the second link, these 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, if you like, momentum that gets wired into the nervous system, into the mind, into the body, that habit of doing that, those habits involved in that. It may be a habit when we feel a little bit uneasy, that that’s the impulse, to reach for the cigarettes. A little socially anxious, or just after dinner, to relax or whatever it is. These habits are part of the *saṅkhāras*.

And then we might take an example, you know, 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 cafe 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, comes more to dominance in the mind. And maybe the mind starts thinking, “I really need one. I really need a cigarette right now. I could really use a cigarette. 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. I know I was going to quit. I can quit tomorrow,” or whatever. The mind starts justifying something to itself, justifying this whole mechanism of desire and 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. They’re lighting up, enjoying that cigarette. And in a way, that process, we could say, we’ve 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. Maybe a little while after the cigarette we start to feel, “Ah, I failed. I failed in my resolve.” Maybe the self-view 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 the 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 – what are those words? – despair, lamentation, sorrow, etc. Strong words. But the suffering comes out of that. In this case, it’s just the view, “I just can’t do it. I failed again. I’m weak,” and the suffering with that.

But out of that suffering, it doesn't stop there, out of that suffering, because then those self-views are reinforced: the belief that I can't, and actually through that, the will, if you like, the willpower to quit smoking, is strengthened. Something rolls on, *saṃsāra* rolling on, flowing on. And of course the habits, the *saṅkhāras*, the movement, the programming of the tendencies of mind and body (in this case, to reach for cigarettes, to go for cigarettes when we don't feel that good, or when we do feel good, or whatever), all that gets reinforced through this whole process.

So, if you like, so to speak, one time through the cycle just gives the whole wheel momentum there. This is very briefly sketching these processes out. We could take another example, maybe a more complicated example. Perhaps I've been out with some friends for a night out, and we were in a bar or something. And there's, I don't know, a group of women there, and I'm with my male friends or whatever, and a few of us go over to chat to these women. And I'm chatting to one who I find attractive. I'm in the course of this brief chat, and she seems maybe a little coy or whatever, but I give her my number. I give her a card with my phone number on it. But wrapped up in all that, in my impulse, is lots of different kinds of *avijjā*, delusion, ignorance. It's not a simple thing, *avijjā*. But let's say I have a pattern of believing that if a woman shows interest in me, then it proves my okayness. It proves my loveability. So there's some belief that something here will prove something about the self. There's all kinds of delusion; maybe *that's* my particular pattern.

So there's an aspect of the delusion that has to do with my belief in what would prove my loveability. Even in that, you can see that's got all kinds of components involved in that delusion. Now, with that *avijjā*, with that particular ball of *avijjā* there, I also unfortunately have a tendency to view myself, of course, as perhaps not okay or as maybe not attractive, and with that also a tendency to try to prove my attractiveness, my okayness, to others and to myself. So there's this belief maybe that I'm not okay; there's a belief in what would prove it; and there's the tendency to view myself that way and to try to prove it. I keep trying in the world. How much of my actions and choices and speech and dress and everything is trying to prove something?

Already there's *dukkha* there, there's pain, you can see. And all this – I've given her my number, and I've gone away, but it's loaded. The whole thing has loaded my consciousness, because of the *avijjā*, because of these *saṅkhāras*, loaded my consciousness. It's primed my consciousness, my mind, and my senses. So the next day, the next few days, I'm at work, and I can see how the consciousness perhaps narrows around this: "Is she going to call?" And maybe it builds, you know, and the body keeps checking the mobile phone: "Any messages? Any messages? Any messages?" And maybe it starts building. It's actually impinging on my ability to concentrate on other stuff like my work. There's craving there. The craving already is complex: I'm craving a certain sound or message notification from my phone, but that's wrapped up – a lot of stuff is wrapped up in that. Craving to check, to be able to check my phone. So there's craving there, all kinds of levels of craving. Maybe I even get irritated in those stretches of time when I can't. Perhaps I have to go for a meeting with the boss, and I have to look really sharp and present something or whatever, or listen to what he/she says very carefully, and I'm a little bit irritated because at that point I can't check my messages.

So this whole thing is building, and perhaps there's increasing frequency to how I'm checking the messages, and obsessive thinking about it. And I can notice in all this how the mood and the self-view are really buffeted around with waves of excitement, anticipation, hope, anxiety, despondency. It's just

going up and down. “There, someone’s ringing me now. 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. 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, and 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 go 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.”

And 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 kind of melted into each other. It’s not so clear, “She didn’t call, therefore I am unattractive.” Something is happening in the whole mind, 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, that actually just, over time, being involved in other stuff, etc., having other things demand my attention, preoccupations, etc., distractions, whatever, it gets a little less solid, a little more broken up, a little less intense.

There is the break up 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, so there’s some relief. But still, what the Buddha called the *āsavas*, the ‘outflows,’ the ‘effluent’ (actually, it’s a related word for ‘sewage’), 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, that process, that whole cycle goes through its whole painful contractions, and life and death, and dissolution, or relative disappearance or abeyance for a time. But without the questioning of my belief 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. This will happen until something other, until I have another way of relating, understanding, prying loose this whole process. So pain, 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 kind of non-being, for kind of like extinction. Sometimes we have that just when we want to go to bed at night. There’s a craving: “I just want to turn everything off. I’ve had enough of the day,” you know? But sometimes there are 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, *vibhava-taṇhā*. Sometimes what’s happening is, in the object that we seem to be craving (maybe it’s the chocolate cake or whatever), that there’s actually a painful emotion underneath. Maybe we feel lonely. Maybe we feel unloved. And it’s painful to be with that, and something in the chocolate cake, and in that whole putting it in the mouth

and chewing it in this very 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 in relation to food.

So it's complex, all this. There are different forces operating, if you like, different intentions operating. Or also what happens – and this is interesting too – 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 could be the 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, it's as much the pleasure of the cake as it is the relief of the pressure, the bursting of that uncomfortable bubble of pressure of the craving, so that we're seeking a kind of obliteration of the pressure, the uncomfortable pressure of the craving.

All this can be involved in what's going on for us with craving and clinging and that whole process. Now, I'm going through this very quickly. We could have gone through it much more slowly – certainly a whole talk on one example like this, and kind of taking apart the pieces, and mapping it onto those twelve links. If you *do* want more detail, with more distinctions, this kind of stuff is not hard to find these days. One place is in the book that I wrote, *Seeing That Frees*. Chapter 10, I think, is devoted to going into this in quite a lot of detail.<sup>4</sup> Or Payutto, a Thai monk, wrote a book called *Dependent Origination*.<sup>5</sup> You can find it. It's not hard to find. It's also not difficult to understand. It's just, as I said, a kind of anatomy. Several times with different groups over the years, I've done teaching sessions where we sort of lay it out on the floor, these twelve links, and then we go through different scenarios of 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've got this map, and you're kind of 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, etc. But people really seem to enjoy, interestingly, this kind of dissecting of the anatomy or physiology or the process of suffering in this way, of clinging and suffering 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 kind of map them together." It *seems* to us that we 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 – we often enjoy that feeling. I'm sometimes not at all convinced that that seeming recognition and seeming so-called 'understanding' actually makes much difference. Is it really helpful? What we *really* need here is practices to be able to actually pick up these concepts, if those are the concepts we're using, and really practise with them. So if we're using this idea of the twelve links of dependent origination, where exactly can I come in, in that process? What are the points of entry (and there are various points of entry) that I can come in and actually contemplate in a different way in the moment, or pay attention, bring my mindfulness to bear on a certain link or feature, whatever it is, in ways that actually make a difference, relieve suffering, disband to a certain extent some suffering?

Without that, then we get this kind of – it's really unfortunate: it's a kind of illusion of understanding something, because it looks like we're being clear, because we've got something that

looks concrete mapped onto some concept that is in the teachings that the Buddha used, that otherwise might have remained more abstract. “Great, I’ve understood something.” There’s this clarity of carving up and mapping and corresponding concepts. What we *really* need is practice on the front, so to speak, where the action is, and ways of practising that are powerful, specific, helpful.

So the Buddha said a lot about all this, and in different ways. You know, he said, he pointed out, we can cling – there are lists of what we can cling to or crave. He said, 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: the personal, or more social, or cultural, or religious, or secular cultural, whatever. And we also cling to self-views, different views of the self, beliefs about the self.<sup>6</sup>

So all that’s there, and sometimes people do dissect this anatomy and present it as a teaching, or try and approach the teachings that way. And sometimes all this is there, and the Buddha’s making all these distinctions, etc., and what we take as a message is this teaching: “Just let go of everything.” [laughs] Even as I say it now, you can recognize, it’s like, 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.” And we love, 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, and the attraction of what I’ve called ‘simplism’ in other teachings, in other talks I’ve given. In this “just let go of everything,” then liberation has nothing to do, per se, with an experience, or *any* experience. So you get the instruction, “Don’t try to repeat experiences. Even if they’re wonderful, insightful experiences and openings and mystical experiences and all that, don’t try to repeat. 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.

It’s very enticing and attractive, the simplicity of that teaching. And then, people are different; they may take some of those divisions that the Buddha talked about, and take them as areas of investigation. But just basically, the teaching is “Let go of everything. Just let go of everything.” And of course, we can be – I mean, some people *are* – completely over-simple. So almost not even going into any tools of how we *might* even let go of everything. But generally speaking, we offer tools, and tools are offered. The first one would be, 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. It’s an important question. How do I notice craving? How do I notice that movement of desire or clinging, whatever we want to call it? Well, one obvious way is my thoughts tell me. I have to be aware of my thoughts. My thoughts tell me, when they keep returning to this same object, when I hear the mind say “I want,” or, even more, “I need,” “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 or whatever.

But perhaps even 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. This presence of *dukkha*, my mindfulness revealing a feeling of *dukkha*, just slight dis-ease, uneasiness, etc., imbalance, if you like – all that reveals, “Aha, there's some craving. What is it that I'm craving?” So that, 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. So this is what I want to go into, probably in the next talk, is that 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. So at some point, thought no longer needs to be there for the more subtle aspects or subtle manifestations of craving.

But when there's craving, there is noticeable (*almost* all the time, let's say – no, let's say *all* the time), there is with craving 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. So 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. 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.

(1) So 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. And again, sounds simple, and it might work sometimes. Sometimes this might work. It's just, let go of wanting the chocolate cake. Just let go. Or I'm attached to views: “So-and-so said this, but I think that's wrong, *da-da-da-da*.” It's like, just let go of it. So that's one kind of instruction is just notice it and let it go. Let's run through a few of the sort of maybe more common tools, if you like, that are in the service of this “just let go of everything” sort of teaching. So 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.

(2) A second would be to use some **skilful reflection**. So here's this thing. Maybe it's that chocolate cake that I notice there's this craving towards it, whatever, and just to reflect, for example (this is a 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, whatever it is, and then an hour later, either I'm going to have a tummy ache [laughs] if I've eaten too much, or it will just be gone. It's like, where did it go? Where is that pleasure now? How much lasting fulfilment can it really give me?

So this is a very common teaching. It's 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 just actually, again, reflecting, “Well, how many times in the past have I changed my view, sometimes to the 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. 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?

These are some very [common teachings]. Again, I'm going through 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 kind of running through, as I said, 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: skilful reflection.

(3) The third possible tool is to **become acquainted with, through mindfulness, what we call *papañca***, or 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, 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 *papañca*. It's a relief. We realize, "Oh, I'm not the only one to be crazy that way." But just hearing these stories, it's not going to cut the mustard at a very deep level. But 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. And 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. 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," etc.

And afterwards, when it dissolves a little bit, we begin to see we were fabricating something. There was this *papañca* state, this whole web-weaving of complication and elaboration and proliferation, around self and around issue and all of that. There's fabrication. And in contrast to that, when we're so-called 'simply mindful,' there's the sensation in the chest. Yeah, it's contraction, and it's unpleasant. We can be with that sensation in what we sometimes call 'bare attention.' And that state of mindfulness and of so-called 'bare attention' is a state of no *papañca* and no fabrication. We're just with the thing 'as it is.' And through repeated mindfulness practice, we actually get more of a taste for this, more of a taste of living without *papañca*, not caught up in the maelstrom in that teacup, not entangled in the sort of 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 *papañca* and we're with things more in the way of what we could call 'simple mindfulness,' or we could call 'bare attention,' or we could say 'being with things as they are, simply.' So that **simple mindfulness practice in contrast**

**to *papañca*, and seeming to see that we're not fabricating when we're mindful.** That's a skilful tool too.

(4) 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. Here, maybe I'm sitting on a retreat or something, and my back hurts, or my knees hurt or something. And there's the unpleasant *vedanā*, 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," etc., "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. And one skilful 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 *vedanā* 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 that way, 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 kind of fountain, if you like, of moment-to-moment unpleasant *vedanā*. And then I'll notice the craving go with that.

So there's the unpleasant *vedanā*, and there's this rejection, and they kind of go together. There's the arising of the unpleasant, 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 being, maybe, again, on retreat, cooked for me, or I cooked it for myself at home or 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 on to, 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. 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 *vedanā*, and just watch these little bursts of impulse, of craving, of rejection, of pushing away, arise. But they just sort of arise and they subside, they arise and they subside, and this consolidation and building of that, and solidification, 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.

(5) 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 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, etc., I'm actually – just give that some space, just let that pressure kind of build, ebb, and it swells, and then I'll notice: oh, it reaches a certain point, and it just subsides again. 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. I'm developing my capacity to tolerate that uncomfortable pressure so that I don't just have to give in to it.

In time, what happens is, instead of getting reinforced, that force of craving, instead of being reinforced because I keep giving in to it because I can't tolerate that pressure, I tolerate the pressure, it ebbs. 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.

(6) And a sixth is more general. Touching on what we touched on, elaborating a little bit more what we said before, is actually **just paying attention to impermanence in general**, really being aware: *anicca*. Everything is impermanent. 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, etc.

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. That would be a sixth possibility. Maybe, with that sixth possibility, 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, etc. 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 we don't *believe* so much in such a solidified sense of self. Sometimes that's what happens, and that does work.

But you can already hear ... [laughs] I apologize. I'm not selling this very well. [laughs] 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, 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, "Well, what can this really give me? Because everything is 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, and 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 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.

Something there, as I said at 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. Just needs 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, if I try and do that, even with a sort of feeling of breadth and all-encompassingness, or *especially* if I have that feeling of all-encompassingness, there's something a bit – I don't know – silly in it.

Because as well as just simply discerning what are helpful and unhelpful desires in different situations – very basic; we haven't even talked about that – but as well as that, so much more is possible. *So much more* is possible. How do we think of 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, craving, etc., and exploring it experientially, with a certain (what I'm going to call) practical intelligence, facility in practice, I start to learn something about letting go of clinging, through practice, at 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.

We 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 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. Again, going back to what we said before, even contemplating impermanence more and more rapidly in the meditation, the mindfulness gets very intense. It's true that sometimes really intensely focusing on rapid impermanence, very finely, something can happen that can kind of 'pop' that whole experience, and 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 practising 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, if you like, experience of non-appearance, the experience of the Unfabricated, of the timeless, to the world of appearances and 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. So again, just having the idea of letting go of desire, letting go of craving, etc., 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, will not allow an adequate view of self, of others, of things, of the world, and also 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. We’ll say a little bit about it in part two of this talk.

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, oversimplistic, and it will limit both the depth that we’re able to open to, and thus our whole sense of existence, and also 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. This is what I hope to elaborate.

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<sup>1</sup> SN 35:191.

<sup>2</sup> Joanna Jurewicz, “Playing with Fire: The *pratītyasamutpāda* from the perspective of Vedic thought,” *Journal of the Pali Text Society*, 26 (2000), 77–103, [https://www.academia.edu/8181977/Playing\\_with\\_Fire\\_The\\_prat%C4%Abtyasamutp%C4%81da\\_from\\_the\\_perspective\\_of\\_Vedic\\_thought](https://www.academia.edu/8181977/Playing_with_Fire_The_prat%C4%Abtyasamutp%C4%81da_from_the_perspective_of_Vedic_thought), accessed 25 July 2020.

<sup>3</sup> E.g. at SN 12:65, where *avijjā* and *saṅkhārā* (the first two links in the standard twelve-link presentation of dependent origination) are omitted.

<sup>4</sup> Rob Burbea, *Seeing That Frees: Meditations on Emptiness and Dependent Arising* (Devon: Hermes Amāra, 2014), 118–31.

<sup>5</sup> Prayudh Payutto, *Dependent Origination: the Buddhist Law of Conditionality*, tr. Bruce Evans (Bangkok: Buddhadhamma Foundation, 1994), [https://www.dhammatalks.net/Books3/Payutto\\_Bhikkhu\\_Dependent\\_Origination.htm](https://www.dhammatalks.net/Books3/Payutto_Bhikkhu_Dependent_Origination.htm), accessed 14 July 2020.

<sup>6</sup> E.g. MN 9, SN 12:2.