

**The Way of Non-Clinging (Part 2)**  
**Eros Unfettered – Opening the Dharma of Desire**  
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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 in our lives? What are the ways, 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 kind of states of mind and states of being when they arise, and how can we find some relief, how can we 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 or 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, again, grasping at something, or pushing something away, grasping or aversion.

This subtle feeling, we get more and more familiar with, and we notice: 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, relaxing the subtle body, relaxing the energy, relaxing that tension that's come in with that grasping of clinging/craving, releasing it. So actually working directly with the energy of that contraction, and releasing the contraction. Now, you could, as I said in the first part, you could think about the object. You could contemplate its impermanence, etc. Or you can work directly with the actual energetics of clinging and craving. So that's just 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. And 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. The very calmness that's made possible through the release, again and again, finding some craving, releasing it, finding some craving, releasing it, the calmness that can open up through that actually allows me to go deeper, more subtle into the process.

So this is actually a very enjoyable process. Most people who work that way in practice – it's a certain way of working. It's a very, very lovely way to practise. Very lovely. All kinds of beauty and

softening and ease comes in. We 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. 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. *Dukkha* here means something really quite broad in its range, really from quite gross to really, 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 sense of 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, and 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. It melts into a kind of oneness, etc., or it begins 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 as I develop this practice, and I enjoy it, and I get into it, and I feel the yumminess of it, I start to see not just *dukkha*, not just the sense of my self 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, and 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, this practice really works, and can take you very, very deep. Other people, it sort of comes to a 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 of subject, object, time. There's 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 a way of looking is (wrapped 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 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, or it might have less clinging, or it might have really a little clinging, or it might have really, really, really a tiny [amount], only the subtlest clinging. But always at some moment, 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 here, a spectrum of subtlety. It gets extremely subtle, and as we all know, it 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.

So when you start to explore this way, apart from the loveliness of this practice, uncovering more subtle levels of *dukkha* is actually, contrary to what it might sound at first, like, "Oh, that's horrific, the sort of excavation of more and more *dukkha*, more and more clinging, suffering," no. Because I'm feeling the *dukkha*, I'm releasing it, I'm finding ways to release, it actually feels very beautiful. There's great beauty, great, as I said, yumminess, really, in this practice. Really, really lovely way of practising. 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 getting to the really juicy stuff. It's not really opening things out in a very deep way, to hang on, to cling, in effect, to a distinction between craving and clinging, for instance.

What I start to see – I'm just picking this one way of practising as a way in; could pick another one – but 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: they arise dependent on the way of looking, dependent on the mind, and dependent essentially on the clinging. 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 – 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. I probably start to see it first more easily with the self, but it can happen different ways. And then maybe that leads to another kind of practice. Maybe I see a certain amount of the fabrication of the self, the dependent arising, the emptiness of the self, through this developed art of letting go of clinging and craving. And I start to have a conviction: "Yeah, this self is an illusion." And so when it feels like I'm looking at something and I see, "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 that's kind of an illusion, because I've seen this whole self is a construction, a concoction, a fabrication. It's a *saṅkhāra*, 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, my standing meditation, and just whatever arises,

I'm regarding it as *anattā*. *Attā* means 'self' in Pali; *anattā* means 'not-self.' This is not-self. It's not me. It's not mine.

So *this* becomes a way of looking. Some people can just move straight into that practice. Other people need to do another practice that enables it a little bit. But 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. 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, but we have a sense. I look at my hand: it's *my* hand. It's not yours, it's mine. A memory comes up, it's mine. I don't even have to think this, but that conception is operating naturally. So we're just kind of 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. You need to learn how to navigate it and stuff. You can really develop it. Very, very beautiful. 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; because I'm releasing the clinging. I'm releasing the clinging, and I see, "Oh, they fade." I 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 to, again, a pain in my back, or in my knees, or whatever, and "*anattā, anattā, anattā,*" and maybe even the consciousness that knows this *vedanā*, this unpleasant *vedanā*, it's also *anattā, anattā*. I develop that skill. Takes time. Really an art to develop here, and in stages usually. I've talked about it elsewhere; I'm going very quickly now. And it's not that I then see this rapid impermanence of *vedanā*. No, I actually see that unpleasant *vedanā* will – 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 the 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. But eventually, if I keep doing it, keep doing it even on the pleasant *vedanā*, it becomes neutral. And then, eventually, even those neutral sensations disappear. There's no sensation there in the knee any more. 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: dependent on the way of looking is the construction of my experience, my perception, and what appears to me.

And this practice can go really deep, the *anattā*, in terms of how much it can deconstruct or unfabricate the world of appearances. And 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 – a 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.

And this undermines. When I see this again and again, 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 the 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. And so, in the tradition, picked up especially in the Mahāyāna tradition, clinging, this word, 'clinging,' has a much broader range of meaning than just the kind of gross obsession, etc., 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 *avijjā*, this basic level of delusion, of ignorance, is a form of clinging. *Avijjā* is grouped together with other forms of clinging.

And then I can start to actually employ another way of looking, through the development of these arts, these practices. When this understanding, when I have conviction in my heart that something in me knows – I've seen them fade dependent on the way of looking, and I see 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. Again, it's very fluid, very direct, a 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 the 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." What happens then? An even deeper level of fading. And 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 that seems or eternal that seems – fabrication, empty. Whatever object, however vague, however light, however spacious, however transparent-seeming – empty, fabrication. And there's an even deeper fading because the *avijjā* is being withdrawn, being undermined in that moment. So you can go into this, the whole process, taking up the teaching of clinging, and going deeper and deeper with my understanding of what's involved in this term, 'clinging,' and how to actually work with it to *not* cling in the moment.

We actually start to see that even attention [is a form of clinging]. To have any experience, I need to in some way pay attention to that experience. Even if it's a very open attention – I'm attending to the totality, 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 kind of

grasps – like a pair of calipers, it grasps at the object that we’re paying attention to. Even attention is a form of clinging. So these distinctions (if we go back to the thing about the twelve links of dependent origination, distinguishing between craving and clinging and *saṅkhārā*, etc.), as we go deeper into the whole thing, the very delineations that we had started off with (and that are useful, as I said, at a certain level), they begin to blur, and we see how clinging, craving, *saṅkhārā*, *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 me fretting over hoping that this woman calls me – you can see in that, there’s the self-view that I’m (what was it?), the self-view of 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, etc. 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 tendency to view things that way, and my trying to prove it, that movement to prove it is also a kind of craving and clinging. So even at that level, but certainly as you go deeper into this whole question in practice, practising 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, etc.

But essentially, I learn how to play with releasing clinging in the moment, and ‘clinging’ in this very broad sense, at different ranges of subtlety, through playing with different ways of looking, and that develops. I see that as I do this, and I let go of clinging very, very deeply, at a very deep level, the world of appearances (self, other, world, time, etc.) is fabricated less and less. And there’s a spectrum here of clinging, of self-sense, of *dukkha*, of sense of objects, of solidity of time – all of that. It’s one spectrum of fabrication. And if I develop the art of this, eventually I can – language is difficult, but 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 even approach except by negatives. And through that seeing of that dependent fabrication, dependent fading, dependent unfabricating, and the totality of that in an experience of the Unfabricated, I understand, I need to 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 a very, if you like, rudimentary and simple concept 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. Included, as I said, in the idea of ‘ways of looking,’ is really the way of relating, the way of conceiving, the way of sensing, if you like, perceiving, framing, and all kinds of things. All that’s wrapped up in the way of looking. And this concept, ways of looking, and the concept of fabrication – very, very simple concepts. So 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. Even someone who’s not gone within 10 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.

So 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, all of that. More

normal state of consciousness, still the sense of self, very real, etc., but less oppressive, less dense, less separate, less contracted, and similarly with the issue, etc.

And then a beginner who's just exposed to mindfulness, and maybe even first retreat or first course in mindfulness, actually gets tastes of states that involve even less fabrication than the normal state – just a sense of this self being less solid, less fabricated in different ways possible, and even more ease than what they've known through a normal state of consciousness. So there, our little spectrum (*papañca* at one extreme end; the normal state of consciousness, if you like, everyday walking around; and then, if we say, a state of mindfulness when it's, quote, 'going quite well'), right there are three points on a spectrum, and the level of mindfulness is, of those three, the least fabricated. So right there, it's like, this isn't rocket science. What's possible, though, is to really extend that spectrum, and really see how all our experience fits onto that, and 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 really what we're 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 and on clinging, on the way of looking and on clinging. Going back to, return to, if I'm contemplating impermanence, rapid impermanence in sort of intense perhaps Mahāsi-style or Goenka-style practice, etc., or just other forms of practice, and 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. And then it's a way of looking that tends to, if you like, fabricate what it sees. So I start to see process. I start to see more beginnings and endings. And I start to have a sense of, or appearances begin to become more fragmented, and I start to see, "Now I'm seeing the atomic reality of things." Am I? Is it the reality? Is it the ultimate reality? Or is it just a way of looking that tends to, because I look in a certain way, what appears to me is conditioned by, fabricated by, that way of looking?

Yes, it's less fabricated than other ways of looking, or it fabricates less than other ways of looking. Is it the end of fabrication? No. And certainly not is a state of mindfulness the end of fabrication, as I said before. It's like, "Ah, now there's no *papañca*. 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 *papañca*." No. Keep open this question: what's the limit of fabrication? It 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 it, 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 sort of 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 actually there is this pop that I described, or a kind of explosion, and one finds oneself suddenly – one doesn't find oneself; there's an explosion into the Unfabricated, let's say, the Unconditioned, then, again, why is that happening? Well, it happened because there was enough of a release of clinging in the contemplation of rapid

impermanence, that the mind saw that impermanence and just let go, just let go. And it's the letting go of the clinging, because it unfabricates (because clinging fabricates, so letting go of clinging unfabricates). It's not the seeing the 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. And *sometimes* – sometimes this *doesn't* happen; a person is just seeing clinging 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. So 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, in experience, in terms of this spectrum into depth and depths of lessening fabrication and unfabricating. All kinds of beautiful mystical experiences there possible, and an experience of the Unfabricated as well. Both in terms of experience a radicality, and also in terms of understanding. So 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. I don't know." It sounds, like, either baffling, or very far-fetched, or, "Well, it's not the kind of thing that I'm used to hearing." If I don't practise, I won't see this. And if I don't practise in certain ways that allow this and make this understanding, I won't see this, I won't understand, and hearing about it certainly won't have much impact. Sometimes, as I said, even practising in certain ways doesn't have the impact, because I'm not conceiving of it in – even if there's this opening or that opening, or this experience, or that falling away or whatever, 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 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.

So this teaching, you know, the Buddha's central teaching, the Four Noble Truths – there's *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; but the shorthand version, just clinging/craving cause *dukkha*, and there's the possibility of releasing that – and the teaching of dependent origination, which is a sort of more detailed explanation of that. An analogy for that is perhaps that we find ourselves – we don't know how we got there; we wake up and we're, somehow, we realize, locked in what seems to be the inside of some kind of dark, semi-dark (I don't know) big castle or something, and there are all these corridors and stairwells and doors, which some of them open and some of them are locked, and we don't know where we are and how on earth do we get out. And then we're given a map, maybe a map and one of those – I don't know what they're called – adjustable wrenches, you know? You can make it, depending on the bolt that you're trying to undo, make it larger, smaller. And then looking at the map, I try and decipher what's going on. I start to see: the door to get out, or 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 them with my adjustable wrench, etc., and eventually, through all these things that I get, 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. 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. Okay? [laughs] I think that's not such a good analogy! It's a little too gothic. Yeah, 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. But anyway, the point is that clinging, 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. Yeah, maybe it wasn't such a good analogy! Never mind. But the fact is that clinging, the teaching of clinging, is a tool, is a key.

The teaching "don't try to repeat experiences," it can be skilful at times. We can cling and get too constricted to try and 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 it's such a deep level of delusion that's entrenched there for us to believe in the reality of things: "Of course 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 craving.

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. See that many, many times, until it becomes, "Something in my heart knows the emptiness of all things." If I don't understand in *this* sense, then the teaching "just let go of everything," it 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, of 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 that level of reality remains. And then you get teachings which conflate impermanence and emptiness. In that way of limited understanding, just to say that the self is empty means there's nothing but impermanent moments, or you could 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 everything, 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. 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 and map, this tool, key, if you like, to unlock something. Actually, I can’t live without clinging, because – 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 I don’t know if people [are aware of this]; 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 craving, how do they perceive anything? If perception is part of the fourth link of dependent arising, what’s called *nāmarūpa*, and if there’s no *avijjā* and there’s no craving, then actually perception does not arise. 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 *nirvāṇa*, that is dissolved, and so they’re not reborn again.” In other words, 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, even *that* explanation was a problem for a number of reasons. If a Buddha was devoted to, even though they were completely free, completely devoid of delusion, if they were devoted to appearing again and again, being reborn to serve suffering beings out of compassion, to help people, how is it that they could have appearances? They have no *avijjā*. They have no craving. *Avijjā* and craving/clinging are needed for the fabrication of appearances. So you get this very strange sort of basis for ... that’s not the right way of saying it, but from a certain perspective, that was the basis for a whole complex elaboration of Mahāyāna philosophy. I don’t think it’s that simple, because I think the Mahāyāna had lots of insights that weren’t just trying to fudge an explanation of how a Buddha could come back, because in the Theravāda, once a Buddha’s gone, they’re gone. They don’t get reborn. Arahants don’t get reborn, etc.

In the Mahāyāna teaching, there’s actually a teaching that most people respect that says only a Buddha – not even an arahant, but only a Buddha – can contemplate the full emptiness of things and have appearances at the same time.<sup>1</sup> As I explained in the practices, for someone who’s not a Buddha (which includes an arahant), when they, if you like, lean heavily – in attending to something, whatever it is: a sensation, a perception – in the very attending to that object, they’re leaning, if you like, or

they're using a way of looking that also knows thoroughly the emptiness of that object, then that object fades. So either everything fades when they fully contemplate emptiness, or they have to kind of go into a mode where they're not actually leaning so much on that insight of the emptiness. And, if you like, this residual *avijjā*, this kind of default *avijjā*, is reasserting itself so that they can have appearances. If you're listening to this, "This is so abstract" – but it's a funny thing, and if you know this level of practice, and if you understand 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, it's said, is able to see both – both fully know the emptiness, *and* have the appearance of things.

This can seem like a very strange, abstruse, abstract Mahāyāna teaching, but there's a reason, if you're following all this. There's a reason for it, reasons. And then one way of conceiving of what Vajrayāna practice is, tantric practice is, is it's kind of, if you like – and I use this word in a positive sense – 'faking' a Buddha-mind, so that we're kind of allowing our insight of the emptiness of whatever it is we're perceiving, we're allowing that to pervade the way of looking, but in a lighter way, so that this object that I'm looking at becomes *relatively* transparent, and I *know* its emptiness, but I'm not leaning on that insight into emptiness so much that it actually fades. So I'm kind of playing with walking a tightrope of keeping appearances around, but seeing them, knowing them as empty. If I lean on that insight too much (of the emptiness as I'm looking at this object) – I'm not going away from the object; I'm looking at it, but knowing its emptiness – that object will fade. There's much more to it involved, and we're going to come back to this, but tantric practice, one of the aspects that's involved is this kind of faking of the Buddha-mind that can actually fully know the emptiness *and* have the appearance. We will return to this. But the point is, I 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. And again, this is something that's really emphasized by all the great Mahāyāna teachers: Nāgārjuna, Chandrakīrti, you name it. So 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 – pick your words. There are countless instances of these statements. No grasper, no grasped, no grasping. No clinger, no clung to, no clinging. They are empty. They are illusory. So you put all this together, and you start to have a different understanding of the whole thing. It starts to open up in different possibilities, and certainly a different level of understanding. We can say: don't cling to non-clinging. It's empty, and it's wrapped up in perception. Don't cling to the idea of non-clinging. So 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 "achieved is the end of craving"<sup>2</sup> doesn't mean that I'm living in some way without craving. What would that mean, if craving is part of perception? 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, if you like, dissolution of craving temporarily, and the opening

into the Unfabricated. And all this implies, as I said, the emptiness of everything – of 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. Actually, can go even beyond *that* level of understanding.

Something happens in approaching it this way, and seeing it this way, and 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. Skill here – art actually, art. 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. I can fabricate a little, I can fabricate a lot, can go into the Unfabricated. 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 it just feels like, "I'm just so present. Everything is 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 I won't go into that now.

But 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, it's 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 the really deep unfabrication – some of you might have heard of the formless *jhānas*. These are available experiences: the realm of nothingness, the realm of neither perception nor non-perception, the seventh and the eighth *jhānas*, 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; means 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. Again, Nāgārjuna, others – 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 lingo. You can find many, many instances of that, absolutely insisted upon. The teaching of dependent origination, the twelve links, this is not a reality. This is a tool. This is a key that then dissolves itself. Dissolves, melts itself, that whole link, in *experience*, as we open to the Unfabricated, but also in *understanding*, because we understand that 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. This was an incredible skill of the Buddha, 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 kind of dissolves itself and opens up a freedom of experience, but also a freedom of understanding, what comes with understanding.

Okay. 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." Obviously there's some truth to that. But what if we understand the Dharma and approach it and these teachings of dependent origination, dependent fading, fabrication, ways of looking, Four Noble Truths, clinging, all that, as keys that unlock, that unbind the apparent nature of reality and reveal everything as empty, reveal the world as empty, as magical illusion, and *that's* the point of the 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 is no self-view at all – not process, not atoms, not big awareness, not nothing – any self-view is empty, is a 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.

And the selves that I know are illusory, that I know are fabrications, that I fabricate deliberately and skilfully as arts, they don't have to be constrained to look a certain way: "I always have to look calm, especially as I'm a meditation teacher." [laughs] Or 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, if you remember *Mr Benn* from English TV. [laughs] You have to be a certain age! So this is really, to me, it's really important, and it makes a huge difference to what we even consider the Dharma is or where we're going.

Actually, I'll just throw one more thing. Just to point out, in addition to all this, that most letting go, most non-clinging, involves actually another object of clinging. And there's no problem with this; it's just, almost inevitably, it's how we don't cling. People say, "Just let go. Just let go," as if we do that independently of clinging to something else. So – I don't know – someone who's addicted to alcohol or

drugs or something like that, you know, 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 – the fifth precept or whatever, through the support of the Saṅgha. They clung to their *sīla*. Maybe the fellowship, a twelve step fellowship. Maybe even they took on the identity, “Hello, 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 addiction.

Or in Buddhism (whether it's secularly conceived or whether it's religiously conceived) and 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. 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. Even those examples from practice that I described earlier in this talk – in this *anattā* 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 *anattā*. I cling. I'm clinging to this way of looking, seeing everything, everything that comes up – I'm just 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 if I just 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 still, I'm in a way of looking then, 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 *relatively* less doing; it still involves doing. But I'm effectively clinging to that doing and that conception and that way of looking, and that clinging enables letting go. I think it was one of my teachers teacher's teacher, I think, Ajaan Dhammado, a Thai monk. I'm not sure when he died. He died quite young in Thailand, a Forest monk in Thailand. I think it was him that used this analogy of it's like a ladder. The Dharma and practice is like a ladder. When you're climbing a ladder, for your feet to let go of the bottom rung, first I need to put my feet on the bottom rung, then to let go of the bottom rung my hands grip another rung, or my one foot, if you like, grips or finds a basis in the next rung. My hands, probably, unless I'm trying to do it without hands, something's gripping something, if you like, higher, or more subtle. And in this way we go.

If we take the addiction example, clinging to *sīla* is a more refined clinging than clinging to alcohol. Clinging to *anattā* is a much more refined clinging than clinging to self-view (“this is me, this is mine,” in its even unconscious way). And then even clinging to the view of *anattā*, even clinging to the view of emptiness. So 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, the river, whatever it is. You can let go of the ladder, the raft.

But it happens progressively, at more and more subtle levels. If I don't have a way of looking and ways of clinging to more subtle things, this idea of “just let go of everything,” it really is pretty silly, and we'll just end up either with complete frustration, or blindness to what I'm clinging to, or just this

kind of like, “Oh, well. What are you going to do? It’s hard. Maybe the real masters somewhere living in some caves can do something, but basically the rest of us have just to put up with our delusion and our clinging.” And we try and let go of the grosser clings, and we laugh at ourselves, etc. 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 with this ideal of living without clinging, in addition to what I’ve said in this talk. There’s a second problem: would we even, really, deep down, want to? So not to do with delusion, but is it what really the depths of the heart and the being want? What would it even look like, really? So this is what I want to explore a little bit.

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<sup>1</sup> E.g. in the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṅkāra* and the *Mahāyānasaṃgraha*. See also Rob Burbea, *Seeing That Frees: Meditations on Emptiness and Dependent Arising* (Devon: Hermes Amāra, 2014), 402.

<sup>2</sup> Dhṛ 154.