

# Attachment, Clinging, & Grasping

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So today I would like to talk about a core Buddhist teaching that could be considered in common colloquial English to fit under the topic of attachment. And in Buddhism, it isn't just an issue of an attachment. The Buddha put a lot of emphasis on how human beings are collectors of attachments. We collect large bundles of them. They're heavy, all the attachments that people have. As part of this talk, I want to make a point that uses a little bit of odd terminology.

I want to refer to Darmology. Darmology is the Buddhist equivalent of theology. Theology is about the study of God, and things having to do with God, Theo. Darmology has to do with the study of *dhamma*. The study of things having to do with the *dhamma*. It's a Darmology.

I want to offer you as maybe something to keep in mind as we go through this talk a little saying that I made up: Darmology is biology. So what does that mean? And why would I say that? Darmology is biology.

So, attachment. It's a common colloquial word that's used a lot, just casually or without a lot of thought. Generally, it's considered to be something problematic for people. You might say, that person has been too attached to me. It usually means they've been too needy or too connected or they want too much from me or something. That person is really attached to their devices. They're so preoccupied, you can't get their attention or something.

An odd thing happens when you come to Buddha's circles. For some reason, Buddhist teachers and Buddhist scholars don't use the word attachment very often in talking about Buddhism. I get the sense that if we start using the word attachment, people start protesting. Even though it's colloquially used as a problematic thing, it touches some nerve or something where, like, we shouldn't be criticizing this attachment thing. It's important, right?

Some of it might have to do with, in psychology, there's a very positive use of the word attachment, which refers to the kind of healthy bonding or prioritized relationship that happens between parents and young children. If that relationship is not healthy and the connection, the bonding is not done in a healthy way, it can be problematic for a person for the rest of their life. So, attachment parent—my wife, when we had our first child, went to a group. There was a Bay Area network of groups called BAP, Bay Area Attachment Parenting. It was a wonderful group, and they had really healthy ideas about parenting, and it was really nice.

So maybe some of the protest has to do with how the word is used in psychology. But I don't know. I think maybe it's just because it's a colloquial common word, maybe a little bit too personal. A little bit less personal is the usual way that this is said in Buddhism: clinging. You know, like saran wrap or something, that's kind of a safe distance. Maybe the word is not that common, so people are willing to hear it more.

Or the related word: grasping. I like grasping because it's biological. It's something you do with your hand. It's not just saran wrap where you're not responsible. You know, "My smart-phone clung to me. I didn't want it, but I'm not responsible." But grasping is a hand metaphor. Your fingers wrap around some object and hold it really tight. One has to pry it loose, we say in English sometimes, because the grasping can be so intense.

These are very deep and sometimes can touch very deep parts of us. They have maybe a biological origin or place inside, which I'll exemplify by my experience when I was 20 or so. There was a period of time where I had very, very little money. I often was hungry for long periods of time. In the wake of that period of time, having enough food is a biological thing. Out of that time, afterwards, when I started being able to have—maybe before I even started to have enough food—there was a very strong biological ability: grasping for food.

That took the form of thinking about it a lot, took the form of when I could get it, overeating, because I just didn't know when I would get it again, perhaps, and also hoarding, just gathering more than I needed, sometimes because I didn't know if I was going to have enough the next days. Even after I had enough food, and I knew I was going to be safe food-wise for quite a while, this deep biological instinct of survival was still operating for me—the grasping, the concern. One of the things that Buddhist practice did that was so important for me was that Buddhist practice is biological. It affects the biology, affects deep places, the places of the survival instinct even inside, and allows something very deep, biological to relax and feel safe, feel connected, feel a kind of sense of sufficiency and wholeness and goodness that actually can heal the kind of conditioning that can come when survival is at stake. All kinds of things can happen then.

To try to heal my grasping, my attachment, and the behaviors I had around food simply by logic, simply by thinking better, thinking differently and understanding my thinking was a little bit off—I don't think that would have really touched this deep biological source for this instinct to be attached, to be clinging and grasping. But there was something about the deep reconditioning of meditation that really allowed something to release and soften and see the world in a different way. So whether we call it attachment, clinging, grasping, it's maybe up to you. When you hear Buddhist teachers use any of these words, you're welcome to translate it in your mind to one of the words that works better for you. We can get attached to many things, and we then create collections of things.

So, what do we grasp to? What are some of these collections? One of them is to the world of appearances. It's said that some people give more care, attention to what clothes they wear, to the words they speak. There's a tremendous industry in this country and a lot of emphasis on clothes and what people wear. Those have a lot to do with identity, how we want to be seen, how we want to see ourselves.

There can be positive and negative identities. One that I still have to some degree is a negative identity that I don't know if anybody ever noticed. I never wear anything with a logo on it because of this attachment I have maybe, or this orientation I have—I don't want to be identified by anything. I'm not exactly proud of it, but it's pretty light these days. If I have a choice, I don't get clothes that have it, but I have things that have logos on them now, like t-shirts, which maybe I use to sleep with. Being more flexible now.

So appearances, and how we look—our hair, concerns about our weight, concerns about our size, concerns about all kinds of things. There are horrific ways in which in our society we are concerned about appearance, and we're concerned about other people's appearance. A tremendous amount of violence gets done with racism because of how people appear, and all kinds of things that go on. So appearance is a lot of attachments to how people appear, and so a lot of concern with it.

The second big area of attachment has to do with comfort, pleasure. Some people are really into pleasure, and they grasp onto it with certain kinds of intense orientations towards pleasure. This is called addiction in our society. We have whole treatment programs to try to support people with what on the surface looks like intense grasping, clinging to the pleasure of certain substances. But people who don't have addictions, we don't call addictions, we don't even call them attachments, will spend an inordinate amount of time and money to orient their lives around pleasure in a very innocent way.

It's possible that you've spent more money buying a car or more money renting a home or

more money on the clothes you have—all kinds of things. You spend more than you really need to just to do the job of having a roof over your head protected from the environment. Because you want to have a nice view. You want to have it be comfortable on your body. You want to have pleasure in where you live, from the house, the size, the orientation, all kinds of things. There's not necessarily anything wrong with that, but from a healthy orientation to the kind of well-being that can come from a certain modicum of pleasure to being attached with it, and being attached in such a way that maybe we have employment that is not good for us, but it's going to provide us with the money that allows us to have all these creature comforts that we want to have.

So there's a kind of an attachment that drives maybe even behavior or activities that we don't feel even proud about sometimes because of how strong that is. There are some people who feel that having discomfort is a sign of personal failure, that somehow if you have a lot of discomfort in some way, it reflects something bad about your character or something—you failed in some way to have pain or something. You're not really a successful person if you have a lot of pain. Or for meditators, if you have a lot of physical pain in meditation, it must mean you're not really set up for this or not right or you're not doing it right. So there's all kinds of negative attachments to pleasure, to not wanting it, if it's too much pleasure, if it's too much pain.

Some people are attached to pain. Some people's attachment is negative and they don't want it. I've known people from certain religious backgrounds where pleasure and joy are somehow looked down upon, not considered very good. I've been in the role with certain meditators to let them know it was okay to have pleasure and joy while they meditate. Their eyes went wide. "Really? We can do that?" Because it was so intense, their upbringing that was against such things.

So there's a whole complicated world that we live in around pleasure and comfort and pain and discomfort, where there can be a lot of attachments. Human beings have a lot of ideas, concepts that we live by. We need to have concepts in order to be in a complicated social, environmental world that we live in, in order to simplify our life, to understand how to find our way through it. So ideas and things are important. Like we have the idea of traffic lights, and we all share that, I hope, what those mean. It's because we all share what those mean and share that idea of what those are and what red, yellow, and green mean when there's a traffic light, we kind of don't run into each other very often with our cars.

If we didn't have it, if we had different ideas—if for you, red means go, and for me, red means stop—we're a little bit in trouble. So we have shared ideas of all kinds of things. We're good.

But this capacity to have concepts and ideas also gets in the way. We have prejudices, ideas that we have that we project on others. We project all kinds of ideas on other people and judgments about them, ideas about them, who we think they are, who they shouldn't be, or their place in our society, all kinds of things.

We have ideas about ourselves: "I'm great, I'm horrible." It isn't just simply we have ideas. It's a source of a lot of attachment and clinging. Ideas of how we want to be seen. One of the reasons I moved to Pieda Buddha Center, to the San Francisco Zen Center, to be there in that community was because I was already practicing for a few years, but I was still pretty neurotic, I guess.

When I went to the San Francisco Zen Center, I would spend time there, especially when I talked to the people who had been there for some time, a very peculiar thing happened for me. I didn't know it until I was around them that I was playing a lot of social games, meaning I was trying to present myself to people so that I convinced them that I was a certain kind of person, that I was an intelligent person, a kind person, a good person. I certainly wanted people to see me in a certain way. So I acted accordingly. I spoke accordingly. I did all kinds of things to fit into my group. I wanted to fit in. I wanted to not be rejected. So I did all these games, kind of. I didn't realize I was doing it. It was kind of like it came with being a human.

But when I went to the San Francisco Zen Center and just was myself, in quotation marks, they didn't respond the way they were supposed to. Among my friends, we were all kind of supporting the same identities, the same way of being, and we had it down, the game, how to play it. But at Zen Center it was like I was met with a blank mirror. Well, it wasn't blank. I saw myself in the mirror of the other people, and I saw what I was doing. I thought that was invaluable, to see these attachments I had around all these ideas, concepts of who I wanted to be, who I shouldn't be. I really loved the idea of seeing that so I could put it down, so I didn't have to be in the world that way. I found it very hard to see that on my own, in the world, the communities, in the friend circles that I had.

So we have ideas that we get attached to. We accumulate ideas. We have ideas about who we are politically, who we are socially, who we are familially in our family, who we should be in terms of our neighbors and our friends and different friends. We have different ideas about who we should be and who we want to be seen as. Maybe even different circles of social circles you move in, that translate even to what clothes you wear, so that because the clothes are part of the identity, if you go certain places, you put on those clothes because you want to have an identity that matches the circumstance. So there's a lot of attachments there.

The fourth area of attachment is to stories. There can be tremendous attachments to stories, to what happened. Horrible, wonderful things happen. Then we get attached to that, and we view it, we live by it over and over again. One of the places where sometimes the mirror into our mind of how it works, lives in stories, that becomes really clear is not necessarily living with experience and practitioners who mirror this back, but meditating and living with yourself, having to live with yourself. That's part of the challenge of meditation. You get to live with yourself in a way that you can't be distracted.

So you're sitting there and you start seeing, like, I'm a storyteller. I'm telling that same story from 20 years ago over and over and over again. Probably it didn't occur to you that you're maybe a little bit like someone who fishes, has caught a nice fish, and this fish gets bigger with every story. Our human capacity for memory is not 100% good. Now that we can save things on YouTube, our memories can be better. But without that, kind of digital memory thing, things shift and change. It's not unusual that I talk to someone, family or some old friend, and really, that's what happened? I thought it was this. This is what happened. We have different views of what happened. But we live in memories as if they've been frozen, and this is the way it is.

Some of the memories are of resentment, some of the memories of joy, all kinds of memories. But we get attached sometimes to the memories and to who we are as a human being in relationship to it. There was a terrible thing that happened, and we get attached to that story. The identity is "I'm a victim." That victim mentality can go on for decades, for a long time. Or "I'm a savior," and that can be where we get stuck, and that's who I should be. So it goes on to stories that we make, and stories that we live in.

We live in stories about the future, stories about how great we will be, or how terrible it's going to be in the future, stories of fear. These stories sometimes are often stories where we're the main character. It's kind of a surprise to really meditate, to see the kind of trains of thoughts, ideas, story-making the mind is making, to see how many of them have us as the main character. It's a little bit shocking to realize how repetitive these things can be. As I like to say, if someone followed you around all day, and was talking to you the whole time, and was as repetitive as you are—some of you might be, in your heads—you would beg them to stop talking. But it doesn't occur to you to do it, to ask yourself to stop, usually, because it's almost as interesting the 100th time as it was the first time.

So we're attached to it, we're so concerned, it's very personal. It's very closely related to what we identify, the identity we are holding on to about who we are and what we are supposed to be. So that's four areas already. These are areas that the Buddha emphasized. He

emphasized there are areas of attachments and that we collect in these attachments in all these areas.

Then the last one he had, the fifth one, is cognition, sometimes called consciousness. It usually has to do with an attachment to who I am as a cognizant, cognizing person. The ability to cognize, the ability to be conscious, the ability to be aware is so central and deep that some people, especially religious people, especially people who practice meditation, sometimes get attached to "this is who I am." "I'm some kind of pure consciousness, I'm some kind of non-dual consciousness, I'm some kind of ultimate consciousness, I'm some kind of pristine consciousness. This is everything else is just attachments and ideas, but this is the real thing. So this is who I really am."

So all these things are things we can grasp on. The Buddha describes that through the process of attachment we're collecting them. So I call these things the five bundles, the five bundles that we're collecting. The usual English way of translating the Pāli word, the ancient word, is the five aggregates. But aggregates are a little bit of a funny word. Some people are not sure what it means. One of my primary reference points for aggregates is things that are like cement, that somehow you put together this cement aggregate with rocks and stuff. I mean, it has different meanings. The gathering together of different things. But it's a kind of an engineering thing or something. But bundles—bundles that we make.

You gather together firewood and you tie it up into a string or with grass or something in the old days. Now you have a bundle. The Buddha said, you have these five bundles that we put together, gather together, and we're attached to them. We attach them all together. They become heavy things that we carry. Sometimes you call them burdens. We're carrying them around.

I liken it to someone who's going to go deep in the woods, maybe for a long, wonderful day of hiking. They decide, well, who knows what I'm going to need out there in the wilderness or a nice hike in the park. So I'll bring five big suitcases with me for all the things I possibly could need. It's a little awkward to carry five suitcases on this nice little afternoon hike. But you don't mind. So you carry one at a time, 20 feet. You go back for the other one. Eventually you get all five, and then you do it again. You didn't get very far into the walk, but it was really good because you had all your suitcases, everything available. All your attachments are with you.

This idea of clinging and the bundles that we have—a lot of this does have to do with ideas. One of the things I believe is happening with our modern society is that we are more and more living in the world of ideas and less and less in biology. Remember, Dharma is bio-

ogy. What I mean by this is how much time people, especially in this part of the world, are oriented towards screens and to data, ideas that are preserved, transmitted through data. I know people now, as soon as they want to know something, they'll ask AI. They get all this information. If they want to buy something, AI review bundles. "What are the good strings to tie my bundles together with?" AI will provide a wonderful answer. "This is the best one."

So that's good, but it means that you're outsourcing all kinds of decisions that in the past were not just ideas that were presented as data, but had to do with a personal connection to something. The personal immediate connection was involved more than ideas. It involved aesthetics, it involves biology, intuition, all kinds of things that come into play that differentiate different kinds of objects we might want to get or foods we want to buy. I believe that if we really trust our biology deeply without any grasping involved, we have deep inner knowledge about what is healthy, appropriate for us to eat at different times. Different calling for different kinds of food. But if I outsource that to AI and say, "I'm going to be doing a lot of exercise today. What should I be eating?"—you might get a good answer. But slowly, step by step, we're losing our own ability.

It's like people who use Google Maps all the time to find their way around, lose their capacity for spatial awareness, spatial intelligence, and they don't know how to get to some place that they've been to 10 times because Google Map is telling them how to get there. We can lose inner biological capacities because everything's outsourced to a screen, to ideas. In a certain kind of way, yes, it makes life easier, but we're limiting and truncating our natural intelligence, our biological intelligence, which Buddhism is trying to get us back to. The Buddha was very clear that these five bundles that we get attached to, they really limit us. One of the ways they limit us, they divide us. They separate out certain parts of us that we focus on and cut off other parts of who we are. They're limiting.

Part of what the biological orientation of Buddhism is to somehow heal those divides, heal the way that we truncate ourselves, limit ourselves, to allow for a broad global intelligence, embodied intelligence, to begin operating. This global biological intelligence that we have that's multifaceted—the biological capacity for attention, which is, well, many different capacities for attention—to have that kind of become harmonious, working together. This heals. This gives us an experience of wholeness, of well-being, of peace, of deep satisfaction, a deep sense of personal contentment, a deep, deep, deep source of psychological and physical health that begins to do the reconditioning that many of us need to have because we become so fully conditioned by the artificial world that we're being given the opportunity to live in more and more. The artifact world, the artificial world of things being constructed



on data, and us interacting with data more and more and more. In doing that, living kind of from the head up, and losing more and more touch with the fullness of who we are and all that that involves.

All that we were designed to have, because there was a time through evolution when we needed to have all our physical capacities fully engaged to understand the environments, the natural environments we were navigating—a time when there weren't even paper maps, in times when there wasn't an app that you can hold up to the bird that's singing, and it'll tell you what that bird is. You had to actually listen carefully and somehow remember and be attuned in a whole different way. So part of Buddhist practice, a very important part of it, is to heal all the divides, all the limitations that are caused by clinging, grasping, and attachment. The primary way, the core way that Buddhism wants to say this is to overcome, bring to an end, the suffering, the *dukkha*, the pain that arises because of these attachments. The core one that Buddhism wants to emphasize over and over again, the early Buddhist tradition, was the attachments to self, self-identity, that is built around each of these five areas: appearances, comfort, ideas, stories, and cognition.

Maybe one or two of those is a little bit of an issue for a few of you here, that maybe you could take a look at. So, and the result of this is really wonderful. To have the inner life become free, become, feel healthy, is a ballast against all these social forces that we live in that want to, if we buy into them one way or the other, for or against them, we end up being less whole, less complete who we are. And it can be done. So I just came back from teaching a month-long retreat, the first one we've ever done at IRC, our retreat center. In terms of thinking about this talk, I had a very silly idea that people who do retreats, by the end of their retreat, their faces and skin are kind of radiating. They look like 10 years younger. I thought, you know, the way to get people interested in these meditation retreats, and probably how we can make a lot of money, we'll just call it a month-long skin spa. Will people be lining up to come? Because it's so important.

So, those are my thoughts for today. We have some minutes before the time for the official, the normal ending. Then we have the potluck. So it's a particularly nice day if you would like to say hello to the people near you.