

Freedom, Ease, and Four Kinds of Grasping

By Kokyo Henkel

The purpose of Zen practice is to live with peace, freedom from being driven by our own habitual tendencies and beliefs, and to help others live that way as well. Sometimes we call this freedom “nirvana” which means the coolness after a fire has gone out. This ease could be defined as the end of all mental and emotional grasping, holding, clinging, attachment. In Sanskrit, “upadana” means grasping and also means sustenance or fuel. In old India, the understanding was that fire was active dependent upon its fuel; the fire energy would cling to the fuel - such as wood - and when released from the fuel, it would go out. When grasping or clinging to fuel ceases, peace and coolness are realized. Therefore, one literal translation of nirvana is “unbinding,” the way a fire is no longer bound to its fuel.

From the Mahayana perspective, this peace and freedom is our true nature, and the nature of the whole world. Our buddha nature is already perfectly free and at ease, beginninglessly and endlessly unbound. Therefore we don't need to create some kind of freedom that's not already here. We just need to appreciate it, reveal what already is, nirvana which is being temporarily obscured by the appearance of attachment. Grasping is that which obscures our naturally peaceful, compassionate buddha nature. The sun is always perfectly shining; it's just that sometimes its radiance is obscured by clouds. We don't need to make the sun any brighter or clearer, but just let the clouds disperse and dissolve, revealing the brightness. Freedom and peace is revealed right at the point where we let go of whatever we're holding onto. In order to let go, we have to see where we're holding on, really take a look at the different ways we might be grasping, so that we can release our grip right at those particular points. One list the Buddha offers, in his foundational teachings, is the four types of grasping.

The first type of grasping, right where we can let go, is grasping the view of an independent self. This could even be seen as the foundation of the other three types. One of the core teachings of the Buddha is that we hold the view that we exist independently, we seem to have an essence, a true self, which doesn't come and go and doesn't depend upon conditions, and which seems virtually indestructible. The teaching of “no-self” is a tricky topic because we don't want to deny that this is “me” and that is “you.” There actually is a kind of interdependent conditioned self, our moment-to-moment body-and-mind experience. This body, these feelings, emotions, the way we conceive the world and think about things, our unique tendencies, the way we respond to things dependent upon past conditioning, and this conscious awareness itself, all of these experiences of body and mind we can loosely call “me.” But, in all of that experience, there is actually no independent essence, no controller or owner. There's just experience experiencing itself. That's all we are, a collection of conditioned continually changing events.

For shorthand, we give ourselves names so that we don't have to say “this body-and-mind experience over here would like to ask that body-and-mind experience over there a question.” We say, “I would like to ask you a question.” This is just a convenient shorthand way of speaking, but then we solidify that “me” and we feel there really IS somebody here in addition to the body-and-mind experience. That's the strange and amazing thing that we naturally do as sentient beings; we continually project a very subtle attribution of something here in addition to

our experience that we call “me.” This is the view of an independent self, the owner of our experience, which we grasp without even knowing we are doing so.

It may not be so hard to hear these kinds of teachings over and over, reason about them, and come to undo the conceptual view of independent self. But there’s a much more subtle innate view of self, which this reasoning starts to get at, but doesn’t really reach. We can think and say that we really don’t believe there is an independent self, but when someone says, “Why did you just do that!?! You’re such an idiot!” then we immediately feel like there is something in addition to our body-and-mind experience: “How dare you say that to ME! You have no right to insult ME!” So even if we conceptually understand these teachings, we are usually still holding this very subtle imperceptible view of an independent self, the innate view of “me.” We don’t even notice we’re holding it; things may be going well until we are insulted and accused, especially falsely accused. Grasping this view is one type of cloud that blocks the shining sun of our true free selfless nature. There really isn’t an independent self, but we quite naturally construct one, unconsciously imagine there is such a thing, and then hold that view and act from it.

The second type of grasping is grasping precepts and spiritual practices. This is like the belief in superstition, but it’s more precisely defined as believing that any kind of precepts of ethical conduct or contemplative practices, in and of themselves, will lead to complete liberation or freedom from suffering. This doesn’t mean that we don’t have precepts or practices. The Buddha was totally into lots of precepts and lots of practices, but if we single out any one of them and say, “this will be the cause of my freedom; if I just practice this completely, that’s all I need to do,” then that’s a kind of spiritual illusion. The complete practice for liberation needs precepts, awareness, and understanding, all three working together. So if we just single out the precepts and say that’s all we need, that’s not complete; or if we think that to just sit zazen day and night, never leaving the cushion, is all we need, then we’ll never be completely free.

We have to be careful that our practice isn’t based on blind faith: just doing some practice because we heard it is the way, and that’s all we have to do. Buddha encourages us to deeply investigate our own experience and see what actually binds us and frees us. We need a well-rounded balanced practice which includes ethical precepts, meditative awareness, and discerning wisdom. Superstition is an interesting thing to look at; all spiritual traditions have various kinds of magical sounding practices. For example, the Mantra of Great Wisdom - if we recite this, it will remove all suffering. How do we understand that? Is it that we just sit back and let the magic take care of us, or is it our wholehearted engagement with the mystery that makes it work?

It is said that when these two types of grasping – grasping the view of the independent self and grasping the view that particular precepts and practices will in and of themselves lead to complete freedom – are known and released (along with any doubts that this is the way to freedom) through clear seeing, discernment, and understanding, that what is called in foundational Buddhist teachings, “stream entry.” One enters the stream that flows to nirvana, and it is irreversible. One can never give up practice any more. One can try to distract oneself and forget all about the Dharma, but it’s too late at that point. Other types of grasping and aversion, greed and anger, can still continue, but one sees that they don’t make sense any more, they have no basis. Once one understands how liberation is revealed, it’s impossible to doubt the path of

practice any more. There is still a lot of work to do to dissolve all grasping, but it's now a natural and irreversible evolution. The work that still needs to be done is to see through and let go of the other types of grasping.

The third type is grasping sense pleasure. This one is so hard, so hard to let go. It's interesting that one can enter the stream to nirvana, and have deep insight into no independent self and still be into holding onto sense pleasure. This is because it's a much deeper attachment; as sentient beings we're wired to like what is pleasant and to dislike what is unpleasant. So, to re-wire our system so that we are not driven by this kind of grasping, is traditionally said to take a very long time. Even after the insight that the wiring was created based on false premises, on the view of an independent self, still the conditioned patterns around pleasure and pain continue, since they are very deep. The Buddha didn't say that pleasure is bad. Sometimes it can get interpreted that way, but it's important to understand that is not what he means. The Buddha did offer a lot of advice about avoiding situations where we get really involved in pleasure. He was quite an austere ascetic himself. I think this is just because sense pleasure is so easy to attach to; if we try to hold onto it or want more of it, that is suffering, and it binds us in our habitual patterns. So, if we're trying to establish a stable practice, then it's helpful to set up a situation where we are not constantly tempted. However there is nothing evil about pleasure. The third Zen ancestor in China said, "If you want to practice the One Vehicle of the Bodhisattva Way, don't be averse to the sensory realm." So, in Zen the teaching is often turned like this, as a response to those teachings that give pleasure such a bad rap. Don't avoid sense pleasure; enjoy it fully, but be careful not to grab hold of it too strongly.

The fourth type of grasping is grasping all other kinds of views or opinions, which tend to cause lots of disputes and arguments. Buddha is not holding any particular position about things; being very flexible, one can respond freely, which can be quite challenging. The third Zen ancestor said, "If you wish to see the truth, then hold no opinion for or against." However, all these things that we seem to be grasping aren't actually graspable. If they were really graspable then we might not ever be able to let go. If we look closely there's nothing anywhere that's possible to really hold onto; but we have to examine deeply and carefully and ongoingly.