

Anshin Devin Ashwood  
*Craving, Compulsions, Habits and Freedom*  
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Welcome. My name is Anshin Devin Ashwood. I've been invited to offer a talk today for Tricycle magazine to explore how turning towards craving with support of the Buddhist teachings can not only be a relief from ordinary worldly difficulty, but also a profound path to freedom in the widest possible sense.

Before the various leadership roles I've stepped into at the Gaia House Meditation Retreat Center, I worked for many years in the addictions field. As a therapist and as a teacher and trainer of therapists, I became intimate with many of the addictive processes that people struggled with and learned a lot about craving and the pain and difficulty that people experience when locked into addictive cycles.

### **A Practice of Profound Freedom**

I also learned that addiction isn't something that affects just some people. The psychological patterns, the spiritual malady that affects people who end up in addiction treatment centers has its seed in ordinary, everyday human experience. And this isn't just about becoming free of addictive patterns. This isn't just about feeling a bit better. Turning towards craving, as we are going to explore today, is a practice of profound freedom.

This isn't just about being free from difficult feelings. It's not just about giving up unhealthy, addictive patterns. This is about being profoundly free, joyful, happy, living a contented and free life. In my work, bringing mindfulness practices to people who are recovering from addictions, it became clear to me that meeting addictions with presence, with openness, with kindness, with curiosity, becoming intimate with the particularities of how our urges and cravings play out in our experience is a self-study program totally in line with the Buddhist teachings.

If you're familiar with the Buddha's four noble truths that he spoke about in his very first public talk, the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*, The Turning of the Dharma Wheel discourse, you'll have heard that the second point he made in those noble truths was that the cause of suffering, the cause of our dissatisfaction, our stress is craving.

Now, of course, there are many conditions which lead to a suffering human being. In some formulas, the Buddha sets out twelve or so links of conditioning which end up in a suffering human being. But the one point in that chain that he highlights in his very first discourse is craving. It's the cause of our dissatisfaction, of our suffering.

There's a teaching in the *buddhadharma*, which in Pali, sounds something like *panca upadanakkhandha dukkha*, which translates loosely as the five aggregates, when clung to, or the five aggregates of clinging, are suffering, stress, are dissatisfaction.

When early Westerners and many of the missionaries went from Europe to Asia and studied Buddhism, bringing with them their more Christian framework, some people translated this *panca upadanakkhandha dukkha* as life is suffering. And that's a fairly poor translation.

### **Craving at a Sense of “I”**

There's a much more particular teaching here, which is life, or the five aggregates, the skandhas: physical forms, sensations, perceptions, formations, consciousness—anything that you can think of as you or yours, when clung to, when grasped at, when craved after, that is suffering.

So life itself can be joyful, can be peaceful, can be many things, but we make it difficult. Life is made difficult by the process of grasping at us or ours in that. And all craving patterns are a version of craving, grasping at a sense of *this could be better, this could be different. I could have more of this, or I could have less of this*. And an “I” in there, a sense of a self that is grasping.

So the problem of craving, of *tanha*, of grasping isn't just that we don't have what we want. There are people who have pretty much all the world could offer them, who are not free of the grasping tendency that wants more of this or less of that.

### **The Mental Habit of Grasping**

I had one friend who was an addiction therapist in recovery, and he told this wonderful story about the first time he realized he had an addiction problem. Him and his friends had stolen a warehouse full of alcohol. They filled their front room with crates of beer from floor to ceiling.

He said that when he looked up at this pile of alcohol, more of his desired substance than he had ever seen before in his entire life, a fear gripped him. He thought, *it's going to run out*. And he realized at that moment that he could never have enough.

It wasn't that he didn't have alcohol that was a problem. The problem was that he could never have enough. The grasping mind, the tendency of grasping, the mental habit of grasping is the problem. And if we can see that, if we can practice presence with that, we can be free of it.

### **The Seed of Freedom**

But our normal human tendency is to turn away whenever we act out an ordinary human grasping habit, whether that's snapping at the children or your partner, going to eat unhealthy foods, chocolate, cake, having a cigarette when you're meant to give up, distracting yourself with mindless scrolling on a device. Whatever unhealthy habits you have which you wished you could change, are the seed of your freedom if we attend to them.

### **Turn Towards the Craving**

But of course, a normal habit is to just act out addictive behaviors unconsciously. While we're doing that, we're not examining the process. If we turn towards what's going on in that moment of reaching for the phone to scroll through Instagram, if we stop for a moment and attend to that moment in the mind, in the body of grasping, we can tune in to the subtle movements of sensation in the mind, in the body and notice what's going on.

The maybe slight contraction of the chest, clenching of the jaw, tension in the shoulders, shortness of breath, whatever it is for us that lets us know there's something going on here that this addictive pattern, this addictive behavior we think will give relief from it. And in fact, it does give relief from it. We are actually given some freedom from the feelings through the addictive behavior, otherwise we wouldn't do it.

We reinforce the conditioning that if we act out this addictive behavior, these feelings are going to go away every time we act out the addictive behavior. Of course. It's perfectly natural to do that.

But the problem there is that we are only able to get rid of the addictive feelings, the cravings, that uncomfortable sensations in the mind and body by acting out an addictive behavior. So we're utterly trapped. We've only got one strategy to get rid of these feelings, and that is to act in a way which in hindsight, we often think is against our best interests.

### **The Self That Arises to Grasp**

But there is a way to be free of the whole process. As I mentioned before, we can turn towards that momentary arising sensations in the body, the thoughts we can be curious about this self that's arising in that moment that grasps.

But doing so, we open up a different way of being. A curious, present way of being that is learning about who we are. And that doesn't just free us from our addictive patterns. It also frees us from our self clinging, which is at the basic root of all our problems.

All our suffering of stress comes from a fundamental ignorance of who we are.

We think of ourselves as a fixed phenomena. We're something that just enters the universe, acts upon the universe, is subject to the universe and at some point dies. We think of ourselves as a being born separate from the universe and dies separate from the universe. But the Buddha taught about a deathless realm which is beyond birth and death.

### **Studying Our Addictive Patterns**

Is there something in studying our addictive patterns that could help us to wake up to this deeper truth? That we're not separate. That our basic being isn't anything other than the universe. Doesn't arise separate, doesn't see separate.

This isn't an imagined spiritual world that we have to get to. This is basically the universe arising in this moment, which includes an idea of someone who's separate, that feels uncomfortable and wants to be free of its discomfort, but goes around acting out unhelpful patterns in that attempt to be free. And it causes a huge amount of suffering for ourselves or others.

Working in the treatment center, I remember people coming in literally physically crippled from their addictions, unable to walk. And leaving three months later with humor, with personality, with physical ability that they hadn't seen for years. And this is just dealing with deep addictions.

The levels of freedom that are possible through turning towards discomfort, through giving up our avoidant patterns by engaging in addictive activities allow us to see a self that arises moment by moment and see the deeper sense of who we are.

### **A Compassionate Practice**

So this isn't a difficult practice in one sense. What is difficult is being trapped in addictive cycles without consciousness, without a way to be free of them. This is a compassionate practice. Feelings just want to be felt. And by acting out addictive behaviors we're not feeling, we're not being present to our experience.

And it might seem hard at first to turn towards the uncomfortable sensations as they arise in the body. It might be difficult to bring compassion to thoughts that we want to reject, to be present with them. But giving ourselves space, opening to this body, this mind, however it arises, is the practice of the Buddha way. This is the self-study which frees us from our selfish grasping, our uncomfortable, trapped human patterns.

### **Good Me, Bad Me**

How many of us have acted out some unhealthy behavior and thought, *I'm a bad person. I shouldn't have done that. I should be beyond this by now. I should have grown out of that.*

We make ourselves a bad person on some level.

On the other hand, we've resisted some wholesome activity and thought, *I'm a good person. I'm managing this. I'm doing this. I'm growing up. I've got out of that.*

And while we feel better about ourselves, making ourselves a good person for resisting an addictive pattern or unwholesome behavior, both ways we create a self that's good or bad. Good me, bad me.

And the danger is, if you're anything like me, if you're good for long enough, the bad self-sabotages it. And, we get into this selfing, this making myself a person who is doing the right thing or doing the wrong thing. Rather than just witnessing a self that is born of conditions and can actually be free of good and bad, can be free of the compulsive urges and cravings that arise naturally as a human.

And this doesn't mean the urges and cravings go away.

### **Turning Towards Our Demons**

The Buddha talked many times about being visited by Mara after his awakening. Mara, the personification of temptation, of unwholesomeness, of confusion, of ignorance. These things came to the Buddha after his awakening in these stories. And Buddha said, *oh, I see you, Mara.*

This is a different way of being than fighting with Mara. We don't need to fight our demons. We just need to turn towards them and see them for what they are. If we are curious, if we're present, we can look at the arising of greed, anger, confusion, craving. And watch the moment by moment arising of sensations in the body, thoughts in the mind, sensations on the skin. Like, dislike this. We can watch all this normal human experience from a less reactive space.

This happens through practice. We just need to start. We just need to begin to turn towards the difficult.

Many of us find it very easy to turn towards what is comfortable, what's pleasant. But turning towards the difficult, many of us never turn towards. Many of us will do whatever we can to turn that away. But freedom from pain, freedom from fear doesn't come in the absence of pain and fear. It comes from fear and pain being present and being utterly unaffected.

Someone who is courageous isn't without fear. Someone who is courageous has fear present and is unmoved by fear. And this is the training we can engage in by turning towards the difficult. When we turn away from the difficult, when we close down from the difficult, we close down

from freedom. Every experience of pain, every experience of craving, every experience of fear and confusion is a gate to freedom.

There isn't any kind of experience that cannot be met with this curious, compassionate, open presence.

### **A Profoundly Human Practice**

So this isn't a practice of gritting our teeth and baring it. This isn't a practice of being perfect. This is a practice of being profoundly human. Of accepting an ordinary human state. Of wanting pleasure. Not wanting pain. Of wanting to be comfortable, wanting to be happy, not wanting to be sad. This is how we've evolved as humans.

We didn't evolve over millions of years, into a successful species that has dominated the planet by openly embracing dangerous situations and engaging in them willfully. We have to be sensible about this. We don't need to put ourselves in situations that are risky for us, or dangerous or uncomfortable. But risky situations, uncomfortable situations do come. And when they do, we have a practice for that.

Instead of turning away, we can see it as a dhammagate, as a portal to freedom, as a way of studying ourselves. As a way of being free from the fear, the anger, the pain in the middle of the fear, the anger and the pain.

And if we fail, if we aren't able to turn towards, or if we act out an addictive behavior, there's another opportunity. How do we meet that? Do we meet that with curiosity? What happened there? What is this? What's coming up in the mind, in the body now?

Or do we blot out the failure and make ourselves a bad self, and engage in more harmful activities which undermine our presence.

### **Urge Surfing**

Every moment, whenever we make ourselves good, bad, successful, unsuccessful, every moment is an opportunity to embrace this experience. If you'd like to experiment with a meditation practice which intentionally turns towards the difficult in a way that's freeing, in a way that allows us to be free from both the addictive patterning that sabotages our life, but also free of the self view, the basic root of our human ignorance, and enter profound freedom, there's a meditation that I can point you to called *Urge Surfing*.

And if you do a web search for *Anshin Devon Urge Surf*, you'll find online a 20 minute meditation practice that you can do as often as you wish, to train yourself in a regular practice of

turning towards the difficult, in a safe setting, in a comfortable setting where you know you're okay. So that when you're not practicing a form of guided meditation and these same urges and cravings come, you're already well practiced.

There's enough space between the stimulus and the response that you can catch yourself and engage in a practice of freedom, instead of acting out those ordinary human habits. So the Urge Surfing meditation is a practice where we bring to mind a situation or memory, where we're pulled to do something that's against our best interests, maybe an addictive behavior that we're struggling with.

It could be eating chocolate in the evening, it could be snapping at the kids, it could be drinking, smoking. Anything that you feel like is an activity that you regret after doing it from time to time. Now, on a scale of one to ten, if ten is a thing that leaves you feeling totally disempowered and on the floor, choose a three or a four.

We're not trying to work with our deepest suffering in these practice exercises. What we do in the Urge Surf is bring to mind a situation and make it quite visceral in our mind's eye, in our imagination. Play out the scenario that brings to mind, brings to our bodies an urge or a craving so that we can turn towards the sensations in the body.

The arisings in the mind, the feelings of like or dislike, the grasping, the craving. And then use the breath as a surfboard to come back to the present, to allow ourselves to be equanimous, to be neutral, to be passive and non reactive in the face of turning towards that which is difficult. And we do that, and we make the situation more visceral and more clear in our minds, and we allow it to crest.

We allow the feelings to rise so that we can turn towards them, and turn towards them, and come back to the breath again and again, until there's a confidence that builds that we can bear these difficult feelings. There is something to be curious about in what's been grasped at. And we follow the breath all the way out.

We let the wave crest and we let it fall. And in doing so, the mind and the body learn that urges, cravings, any discomfort in the body, thoughts in the mind that we wish weren't there, always come and go, whether we act them out or not. And we learn a different pattern from it's only the addictive behavior that makes these feelings go away.

We learn that everything passes in its own time. We grow our confidence in that so that whatever comes, we can meet it with patience, with generosity, with curiosity. And in doing so, be free of

whatever comes. So feel free to follow that. There's also in the same list of guided meditations a mountain meditation you might like to do afterwards if you need to ground.

Interestingly, people who have recovered from serious addictions sometimes have an even better quality of life than people who've never faced serious addiction in the first place. And I think that's really interesting. So when the stakes aren't so high, people kind of muddle through life and have an ordinary level of difficulty and suffering.

But for people who have had to turn towards the difficult, for people who've had to overcome real challenges, they really can find the joy of life, many of them.

### **The Lotus Flower**

And for me, this beautifully illustrates the metaphor in the dharma of the lotus flower that only grows in the muddy water. This beautiful pond lily flower has its roots in the mud, in the composting earth right below the water. That's where it comes from.

We can't be free without the compost. We can't be free without the mud. The flower of freedom comes from turning towards the difficult. We turn away from the difficult, we turn away from freedom. And of course, we don't just have to turn towards the difficult. It's just that that's the thing we habitually avoid.

Please turn towards joy, turn towards love, turn towards peace. And also turn towards suffering, stress, discomfort, angst, anger, whatever arises. This relationship to life is a training that the buddhaway can support us in. Through practicing ethics, through practicing these meditation practices, we develop a wisdom that knows on a much more profound level who we are and who we not.

When working with addictions, I became aware of this Twelve Steps program, which you may have heard of, Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous. There's many of them. But one of the wonderful things about this twelve step program is that when you get to the end of the steps, the 12th step, you're invited to—having had a spiritual awakening, go out and support others on this path.

So we have one of the world's largest decentralized movements. There's twelve step meetings in pretty much every major city in the world, founded on people having had a joyful awakening from their suffering and wanting to support others in recovery from their difficulties. And helping others isn't just the fruit of practice, it's the practice itself.



We don't become fully realized, happy, healthy human beings through a process of gritted self determination to self-actualize and be a better person. That's quite narcissistic. Our realization comes through the service of others.

We might start with suffering so much all we can do is help ourselves. And I think it's great if we try to help ourselves. But also supporting others allows this compassion, this presence, this generosity to really flower. This is the blooming of the lotus, to support others in their path of freedom.

So thank you for your time and your practice today. May this offering of freedom benefit you and benefit all you meet. Please try the meditations. Please turn towards what's beautiful and what's hard to bear. And practice this way with all beings, for your own benefit and for the benefit of all.