

Creative Engagement by Martine Batchelor (Toronto, June 17-19, 2011)

I would like to look at grasping and non-grasping and what I would call creative engagement. Yesterday we were talking about nama factors, omnipresent factors, we won't go into the details because it's a little technical, but what is very interesting is contact and feeling. What meditation and the path can help us to do is change our power to make a choice between contact and feeling. We have contact through the senses, we hear, taste, we encounter somebody, we have an idea. And from that contact generally you have a feeling tone. Pleasant, unpleasant, neither. Often we go very much on automatic. Something is pleasant – I want more. I want it to continue. You have a nice weekend with your friend and as they leave what do they say? "Let's do this again." Let's produce exactly the same feeling. You can have another nice experience with your friend, but you cannot reproduce exactly the same condition and feeling. But often that's what happens. If it's pleasant we want more. If it's neutral we're relatively bored. And if it's unpleasant we don't want it. Even before it's happened we don't want it. We push it away. We have a very automatic reaction and so I would say that the meditation helps us to be with the feeling — it doesn't change the feeling tone — but it makes us be with the feeling tone in a different way. It's less automatic, and we start to have a little more choice.

What the meditation helps us see is that there is contact and there is a feeling tone. Often we think that's the way I am. I am an angry person. I am a sad person. But actually you might have a tendency to be angry or sad, but you're not angry or sad all the time. Generally it comes out of conditions. After there is contact and sensation, either you can grasp, or you can creatively engage. The meditation helps us to have more possibility for creative engagement.

Grasping

I wanted to speak about grasping — how does it work? What is the process of grasping? I would say that in grasping you have identification. The two go together. I'm going to show it to you, to demonstrate how it works. Let's say this (Martine holds up a stick) is precious to me, either it's very expensive or very spiritual, and it's mine. If it's mine I want to keep it, I don't want to share it too much with others. If I do this for any length of time two things will happen. The first one is that I get a cramp in the arm (from holding it up), and often that's a way of recognizing grasping – to notice that there is tension. If there is tension – where am I grasping? What is it I am grasping, what am I identifying with? But there is something much more problematic in terms of grasping or holding in this way. If I continue to hold on like this, I cannot use my hand for anything else. I am stuck to what I am grasping at. And that is the main problem. The grasping occupies us. And we magnify what we are grasping.

Then you could have three solutions to this problem of grasping. The first solution is to cut the hand off, but that is a little drastic I think. That's the ascetic path. The next one is to get rid of the object. But the object is not saying, "Come, come, you really want to grasp at me." If you're in front of certain shop windows you might see the iPad 2 "Oooh, you really want me!" If you see some clothes or whatever you like, you feel the attraction comes from the object. But the attraction doesn't come from the object, it comes out of conditions, and the attraction comes from us, and how much we put on it. If only I had this I would be happy. And this is something the advertising industry totally understands, they really understand grasping, they know how to make objects that glow. Sometimes we see something in an ad and we think wow, it looks amazing. But when we see it in real life it doesn't have the glow any more. And that's because it's not around the things that make it glow. Generally you have two very beautiful people with very beautiful children in a very beautiful house and then the thing is placed there. They know how to make it glow. The problem is not with the object. I think what we do in meditation is slowly release, so then the thing can move.

Sometimes we can have meditative experiences and states. I've often found that people who sit in meditation are waiting for something special to happen. When you feel a little something happening, oh, this is it, it's awakening in the next two seconds. But I would say mostly the effect of the meditation is that at the end of 30 minutes, even if you didn't consider it a good meditation because you were sleeping or you had thoughts, but at the end you have a little feeling of release. Generally this is what meditation helps us to do. This release happens by cultivating concentration and experiential inquiry. Instead of being tight there can be this release, and over time we can bring this release instead of grasping into daily life.

Proliferation and Exaggeration

So the way the process works is that first there is this grasping with identification, it goes together. You grasp and there is identification in some way. I, me, mine. Then by grasping you limit yourself to what you grasp at. You solidify around it, and the next thing that happens that is the most problematic is that you magnify it. In grasping there is this amplification effect, which then is very difficult for our creative potential to be activated. Because generally it becomes very abstract, as we grasp we go a little into abstraction. I would see two tendencies that emerge out of grasping, which are proliferation and exaggeration. Let me give you an example of what I mean by proliferation. You see this beautiful orchid. It looks like the real thing. Sometimes I take an example of flowers and they're fake, and that's funny. But this one looks relatively real. So you have this beautiful flower, the colour, the shape, it's beautiful. I look at it, wow, it's beautiful. I am with it, it adds something to the experience of being in the room. I would say that's not grasping. But then I continue to see the beauty of the flower and I start to think, "I really like this flower. I would like to have this flower in my house. What kind of flower is it? In order to have this flower do I need a green house? Where can I buy a green house. It is expensive to have a green house. Maybe I need to rob a bank to have a green house?" As soon as I want it, I extrapolate from it, and I'm no longer with the beauty of the flower. It does not mean that you cannot think of acquiring an orchid. But to see that when you move into the grasping generally you move into abstraction and you're no longer with the beauty of the flower as it appears now.

That's one thing that happens. And you can have positive proliferation. A negative proliferation can be very painful. It often happens with fear. You might be safe, nothing is happening to me. But suddenly you might think: what if something happened? I have this friend... Once I was leading a retreat and she was crying during the whole afternoon. And I asked her, "Are you OK?" And she said, "I'm fine, don't worry." At the end of the retreat she told us what happened that day. That day she suddenly had this thought, "My cat is dying. My cat is dying without me because my friend is not feeding my cat." And she proliferated negatively the whole afternoon about it. While the cat was perfectly fine. But we have these kinds of things. Suddenly you have an idea, you grasp at it, you proliferate it and you can end up in a very painful place.

Also what can happen with grasping is what I call exaggeration. Something is good, it's fantastic. When you fall in love suddenly you grasp at the person, the person is so amazing, every minute you're with them you're on cloud nine and it's fantastic, and it's the greatest thing that happened to you. and if you're lucky it lasts a week or two weeks, and then that goes, and then you're confronted with the real person without exaggeration. And if they're really nice it's ok, but then you might start to think well, they're a bit weird. You start to see the whole person, not just the exaggeration you produced. If you exaggerate, then it can be very hard to creatively engage.

We can also exaggerate negatively. We often do that. This is terrible, this is awful. I remember many years ago when my grandmother was still alive I took care of her for three days because my mother had to do something else. So in the morning I go and take care of grandma, you know, get her up, and I came there and she looked a little troubled, and I look down and realized she had a little accident in the night. There was feces everywhere, and I had walked in it. And at first I thought, "Oh no," I could feel the grasping arise, going towards exaggeration which would have gone to thought, action, words, and I thought, "No, let's deal with it as it is right now." I took care of grandma first, made her breakfast, cleaned everywhere, and to my utter surprise in an hour it was dealt with, no problem. That's creative engagement. If you grasp you proliferate, you exaggerate, you go into abstraction, and it can be really nasty in that moment. Or there is creative engagement. This is unpleasant, this is difficult, but how can I deal with this? And then generally things are much easier because we haven't exaggerated them. The problem in grasping is the proliferation, the exaggeration.

Words

What I would like to look at a little is that there is contact, feeling and the senses. So do we grasp or do we creatively engage? First we have sound, and that's what I would recommend for today's meditation, just to do listening meditation. But sound. Sounds are interesting because what is a sound? I say something, it's gone. It appears, it stays a little while and disappears. A word is just... Let's do an example. I look at you very nicely, I smile at you, yes yes yes. And I say, "You are enlightened! You are all enlightened!" "Ooooh, she said I'm enlightened. Soon I'll have many disciples, fantastic." Enlightened, it's just a word, does it make a difference? Or, I can look at you a little seriously, a little dour. "You are stupid." "Oh! She said I'm stupid. She's stupid to say I'm stupid." Perhaps in two years time you'll be sitting in meditation and thinking, "Do you remember the time

when Martine said I'm stupid? I thought that was so hurtful, so painful." But it's just a word.

It doesn't mean that you hear a word and it doesn't matter. But creative engagement invites us to ask: Is this saying something about me, or is it saying something about the person who is saying the words? Sometimes somebody says something to us, and they're saying something useful, even if it's not pleasant. I used to live in community and once we had this community meeting every week. Once this friend decided to really go for me. He went for me for a long time and it was really unpleasant. He said, "You organize us all the time, I'm fed up with your organization." But then I thought he has a point, I like to organize, I'm good at it, but at the same time if I do it too much people don't enjoy it. I thought hmm, he has an idea. After that I became more careful, when was it useful for me to organize, and when was it not? That was a great teaching for me, to creatively engage with that.

Another time I was working with some people and I had to see them once a week and one fellow said "I'm not going to meet up with you, and I'm fed up." For twenty minutes he shouted at me, accusing me of this, accusing me of that. But it was all about him. I had not done anything he said. So I just listened to it, I did not grasp at it. And then I said, "Well if you really don't want to meet me you don't have to, not at all." Later on he came and he met me anyway, but to me the creative engagement was that I did not react to it. And secondly I realized that if he does this to me, he must do this to other people, so then I sat him down and said "Wait a minute. You can do it to me, it's ok. But be careful if you do this." We had a long talk about it, because I realized how he might be with other people he was working with. So it's not just that you listen to a word and say, "OK, it's not me." But what does it mean in the larger environment for somebody to speak in that way? Once we were in another community when someone started to be bullied. And four of us got up, I thought it was wonderful, four of us all got up in unison and went to the guy and said, "Stop it, you cannot do this with this person." Because he was picking on someone who was weaker and who could not defend herself. So the creative engagement doesn't mean who cares. But you come from a different place – from a place that is open and stable. How am I with this word? How can I creatively engage with this word?

Seeing

Then you have the sight. You see something, we see the paintings in the room, we see the people here. And what do you do with what you see? It's really interesting, right away there is a feeling tone from perception, from our experience, our culture. You see something, "Hmm, I like it. I don't like it." We often do that with people. "Hmm, I like her hat. I don't like her shoes." Very quickly I like, I dislike. We assume certain things about people because of the way they look. Recently we were at a conference and there was a huge contingent of younger people full of tattoos, some were really covered from the head. Generally we don't have so much connection with people who have tattoos, people stay inside their groups, and it was wonderful, I mean, I totally fell in love with all of them, they had such energy and were really teaching the dharma. What I like is when I'm surprised by someone who looks some way but is different. I like to have to shift my preconceptions. Grasping is kind of like fixing. You fix yourself, you fix others. Creative engagement is helping you to meet the whole of the situation, the whole of the person, you're not just sticking to one thing, you can see the conditions that are arising that create your impression of the person and the situation.

But one thing with sight, which is interesting is that often we have a tendency to grasp at something that is not there. That you grasp at something that is there is relatively fair enough. I like it, I don't like it. But when you grasp at something that is not there... and I saw that when we moved to our new house. We had some work done, we have a little meditation room and we needed a staircase in order to go in the mediation room. I had a vision of this beautiful wooden carved staircase. We never got it because the guy we wanted couldn't do it, and we got someone else and he did something really ordinary, just about okay. Whenever I went to the meditation room I would feel funny and I asked myself what's happening? I realized I was seeing two staircases. There was a beautiful one and there was an ordinary one. I was thinking this one is not as good as that one. And then I thought wait a minute. This one is good enough. I can go into the meditation room, that's the main point, and let it go.

The comparing mind. Often we do this in meditation. I'm sitting in meditation and I feel that next to me is another meditator, and generally next to me is an ideal meditator. She has no thought, is floating a little above the cushion and has no pain. And you compare yourself to that one, and yes, compared to the ideal meditator, yes, you're not that great. The ideal meditator doesn't exist, there is only a meditator working in this moment, who is doing the best that she or he can, with her or his conditions. So to be careful when you start to do this, it

doesn't mean that you cannot hope for something better. But there is the comparing mind that weighs our present conditions against something that is abstract, instead of being creatively engaged with the situation in this moment. Grasping at something that is not there.

Taste

Then you have taste, and with taste again you can see that. When you eat something "Mmm," or if it's something you don't like, "How can I get rid of this?" Yesterday I was in a very Korean restaurant and there are two things I really don't like in Korean food because I had them when I was in the monastery. But what's interesting is that for Koreans these two things are a delight because they're rare and they think it's wonderful. One thing is a soup made with slices of rice cake, for me it was like plastic, like eating plastic in a hot broth, I could never digest it. And the other one was this cold noodle soup. I saw them in the menu and I thought I'm not going to have this. Again there is this contact feeling of no, even though other people love them. So again, to see what do we do when we have food. What happens generally is if we like it we want more, so you have a second slice of chocolate cake, a third slice of chocolate cake and then you have indigestion. And it's not that we're hungry at all, but there is a grasping, I want more. And what do we want more of? To continue the pleasant feeling. The feeling tone. This is an interesting meditation, to be aware of the pleasant feeling tone and how we generally want it to continue.

Newness

One thing that is interesting with food sometimes is that we grasp at the newness of something. And that is problematic because we cannot have a new experience every two seconds. We can't. But you can really see it with food. Let's say you haven't eaten something for a really long time. I had that experience after being for ten years in Korea to go to France in Paris and eat couscous. I went to this restaurant and I had this wonderful couscous. It was amazing, fantastic, the greatest thing in the universe. So what do I do? The next day I go to the same place at the same time and have the same couscous. And it's ok. But it's not fantastic, it's not the greatest thing in the universe anymore. But it was the same thing and I was the same person. And often I think that's what happens, this is dangerous, to grasp at the newness.

The newness comes from comparison. I think this is the same thing that happens when we meditate. When we meditate at the beginning we are likely to have special experiences, it feels amazing, because it makes you experience yourself in such a different way. And you think wow, this is amazing. But then you meditate for ten years, and you don't experience yourself in that way anymore. And you think your meditation is not working. Actually it's the opposite, it proves the meditation is working because there is less and less difference. At the beginning it's amazing because you feel so different. And then over time as you integrate the meditation with your life, there is more peace, there is more clarity, there is less grasping.

Some years ago I was teaching a retreat and met a young man who had not done much meditation. Before his interview I had just said that whatever you feel is impermanent, it arises, it passes away. He came to me and said, "I am having this amazing experience, I don't want it to pass away." I said, "Well..." He really experienced that he was not his thought. He had thoughts, but he was not them. He suddenly experienced himself in a such a different way, he had a feeling of spaciousness, he was so liberated, so of course he wanted it to go on forever. And sometimes you have sensations in meditation that are physically painful. And I'm not saying that meditation will help you to have no pain. But it will help you not to amplify. This is a problem with pain, generally we go quickly into abstraction. This is terrible, it will be like this forever, I won't be able to do this, this is really awful. Instead of thinking: "I have this illness, I have this sensation, what can I do about it? How can I be with it?" I think that's what a meditation on the body invites, going inside the sensation if it's not too strong, but if the sensation is too intense then you might not be able to do this, and then lack of attention, as the Buddha said, might be better. But if you have what I call medium pain, you can try to go into it, and often you can experience it in a different way. If you grasp at the pain you generally proliferate and exaggerate, and that will amplify the pain. Creative engagement will not take the pain away, but it can help us experience it in a different way.

Thoughts

And then you have thoughts. It's interesting how meditation can make us see how we come in contact with a thought. One moment we don't have a thought, the next moment we have a thought. So we become more aware of, "I am this thought." And to see that we grasp at thought. We grasp very quickly with feelings, and also very quickly at thoughts. This thought is me. And the thought can have such a physiological effect. If you are frustrated by a situation, and you have the thought, "I am hopeless," suddenly the whole body and mind

freezes, and you can't move, paralyzed by that thought. Am I as hopeless as my thought is telling me? Generally we can be frustrated, things don't go our way, but we are not hopeless, our senses are working, we can creatively engage. But if you grasp at "I am hopeless" then you are hopeless forever. I have always been hopeless in the past, and I will always be hopeless in the future. This is a problem with grasping, it makes this generalization, it stops our creative potential. To see that we get lost in an abstraction. That's why the idea of emptiness is interesting if you see it as an idea about the flow of conditions. In meditation we realize we are formed by an amazing number of conditions. This inner flow of conditions meets this outer flow of conditions. Arising and falling away. And then to think about creative engagement, that I'm not stuck with the conditions, that I have a creative potential, and I can creatively engage with whatever arises. And sometimes I have to do something, and sometimes I have not to do something, it depends on what is happening.

Listening Meditation

So now I would like to say a few words about the meditation we can do today, if you're comfortable with it. This is listening meditation. The way I would do listening meditation is just to listen. The anchor is the listening. The advantage of listening is that it opens us up to the world, to the music of life, to the sounds of the world. Because when we focus on the breath, on thoughts, feelings, sensations, generally it's inside ourselves. Then we can have an idea that meditation is about self discovery, which it is, but I think it's also a discovery of the world. I think there is a different effect if we do listening meditation, instead of being focused on certain points in ourselves, we are cultivating receptivity, the sound of the world inside our body, inside this room, outside this room. Just listen. The advantage of this meditation is that it teaches us to be with what is unpredictable. We can never know when a sound is going to appear. It comes and it goes. It teaches us to be with uncertainty. How can I be with uncertainty?

We can focus on listening in different ways. But we have to be careful to remember that this is not a scientific analysis. You're not trying to listen in any moment to all the sounds you can hear. That's not the idea. You're not going to get a gold star for how many sounds you hear. Instead we're cultivating an attitude of receptivity, of openness. And of course you also have the stability with the posture, the posture in the body. So you can listen to the sounds, you could be aware of the space in which the sound happens. Personally what I find useful is to focus on the most prominent sounds, and when that goes, I go to the next one. Do I want to listen in a more spacious way, or do I want to listen in a more anchored way? And also I would like to invite you to try not to comment on the sound, try not to name the sound. You will perceive them: that's the bell, or you might hear a truck, of course our perception is very fast, I'm not trying to stop our perception, but try not to do more than that. It's a truck, and you just stay there. You don't even say "Truck," if you can. You just feel the sound as it appears. And then with experiential inquiry become aware of the rising and passing away of the sound. If a sound continues, try to go inside the sound and experience that within itself it changes, it is not fixed, it is not solid. For that sounds are very useful, because it's very easy to do that. That's what I would suggest we do this morning.