

To Comprehend Craving

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When Westerners went over to Thailand to study with the great ajaans, they often found they had problems with heat, the bugs, and the general hardships. The ajaans would teach them a lot about equanimity and patience—so much so that, in some cases, that seemed to be the only message that got through. This may be why we sometimes hear craving, the cause of suffering, defined as wanting things outside to be different from what they are—the implication being that if you accept things as they are, and are okay with things as they are, then you're not going to suffer. All you need is some contentment, some patience, some equanimity. But when the Buddha explained craving, it was something much deeper than that.

The equanimity that comes from just accepting things in the senses the Buddha called worldly equanimity. It's the lowest stage of equanimity, and there are two stages higher than that. There's the equanimity that comes from getting the mind into good concentration and then the equanimity that comes as a result of finding true happiness. You look at the rest of the world, and you're perfectly fine the fact that things are not the way that you want them to be because you've found something deeper and more satisfying inside.

But the craving that has to be overcome in order to find that happiness goes a lot deeper than just craving for things to be different from what they are. The Buddha defined it as craving that leads to further becoming. Now, the term "further becoming," *punabbhavo*, basically refers to the processes that lead to rebirth. That seems to be the Buddha's main focus wanting to understand craving. After all, as a young prince, that was the main reason he went off into the woods to begin with: seeing that he was subject to aging, illness, and death. He didn't know if there was something that was not subject to aging, illness, and death, but if there was, he wanted to find it so that he wouldn't have to suffer at the moment of death—he wouldn't have to suffer from death at all.

You can imagine the cravings that come at death. They're a lot stronger than simply wanting to be away from the heat or the bugs. The Buddha identified them as three. There's craving for sensuality, which is the craving to fantasize about sensual pleasures. Of course, from that craving comes the desire to find those sensual pleasures. It's a craving that goes very deep. You can be perfectly okay for a while with things being the way they are outside as long as you get to fantasize. But eventually your fantasies open a huge Pandora's box. At the moment of death,

when the mind can't stay here in the body, when this being that we've created out of our attachment to the aggregates has to move on, if it hasn't uprooted craving for sensuality, it's going to go for sensual pleasures of almost any kind. People can be reborn as dogs—or even worse—through sensual craving.

Then there's craving for becoming itself: to be a being in a particular world. When you find that you can't be a being in this world anymore, you're going to feel strongly threatened. If you haven't overcome the raw craving to be a being, you're going to grasp at any identity that opens itself up to you. And, given that we're driven by craving at that time, this can go anywhere.

Then there's the craving for non-becoming, which is basically the craving to annihilate what you are or the world you're in. Suicide would be a prime example of that, but there are other ways of trying to obliterate yourself as well: the people who drink themselves to oblivion, the people who just want to destroy the world they're in. They don't like what they've got, so they want to blow it all up. Of course, if you've indulged in that kind of craving, that too becomes a craving that will carry you on at the moment of death—usually to some pretty obliterated states.

So these are very strong, deep-rooted cravings that we've got to work with here. We have to keep that perspective in mind, because all too often, in recent times, Buddhism has become the religion of the present moment. As long as you're okay in the present moment, that's all that's asked. Don't worry about what happens after death: That's what they tell us. In fact, there're some versions of Buddhism now that say, "We have to leave what happens after death as a big mystery, honor its status as a mystery, and not try to resolve it."

But the whole point of the Buddha's teaching was to bring light to that mystery and clear it up. He didn't want to leave any stone unturned. After all, he's the Buddha—the one who knows. And one of the things he came to know in his awakening was how beings die and are reborn in line with their actions. Their actions, of course, are driven by their cravings.

So we come to the present moment not because it's the goal of the practice, but because it's the place where we get to work on the skills we'll need at the moment of death, so that we can see and master our cravings clearly right here, right now.

This is one of the reasons why we create this state of becoming, this state of concentration. You inhabit the body, fully inhabit the body. Don't let there be any ectoplasms of your mind leaping out anyplace else. Be aware of your head in your head, your hands in your hands, your feet in your feet. In other words, try to give all your awareness of the body a sense of equality. No one spot has to take

predominance over the others. Or if there is one central spot, it shares the spotlight with everybody else. You fully inhabit the body. It's good to create a sense of well-being here by the way you breathe and work with the breath energies throughout the body so that you feel good being here, and not want to slip away.

That way, you can watch as other potential becomings come up and not get pulled into them. You want to know them because the becomings on the large scale that take you from one life to the next start in the mind in these small-scale becomings as a thought world appears. There's usually some drive to go into it. Watch out for that drive. Try to nip it in the bud. You'll find that the mind starts complaining, "Can't I have a little bit of pleasure? Can't I have a little bit of whatever?"

You have to regard it in the same way that Ven. Sundara Samudda regarded a vision he had. He was doing walking meditation one day and he had a vision of a beautiful woman at the end of the path, inviting him to disrobe, saying, "As long as you're still young, you should enjoy sensual pleasures. Wait until you're old. Then you can come back and become a monk, and I'll become a nun." He said that he looked at her and he saw her as a trap of death laid out. That's how you should regard your distractions here as you meditate.

If you find it easy to slip off into a distraction while you're young and healthy, or at least relatively well, what's it going to be like when you're at the moment of death? Contentment, acceptance, patience, equanimity won't be enough to cut it at that time. They may make things a little bit easier. The people who accept the fact that they're dying have a huge advantage over those who refuse to accept it. But there's a lot more that needs to be done beyond acceptance.

You have to comprehend craving, which means ending all passion, aversion, and delusion around it. We talk about the different duties with regard to the four noble truths, and that the duty with regard to craving is to abandon it, but there's one passage where Ven. Gavampati says he heard it from the Buddha that you should try to comprehend all four of the noble truths. After all, how are you going to abandon craving until you comprehend it? And of course, it's in developing the path that's you come to comprehend the path.

So look at this as an opportunity to understand your cravings. These are the things that will carry you on, and they mean business. They may seem playful—lots of fun. But they can lead you into all kinds of places where you don't want to go. Think of those Brahmas in one of the stories about how the universe evolves. After the previous universe had devolved, there were some Brahmas staying way up in the higher heavens. When the new universe begins to form, they come down to check it out, and they move along over the waters, lit by their own luminosity.

They see a film on the water. They say, “What’s that? It looks delicious.” One of them, a little more wanton than the others, tastes it with his finger. And he says, “It tastes like a combination of ghee and wild honey.” So he sets on it. The other ones see him, so they set on the film, too. They start eating and eating and eating it, breaking it up with their hands. As they do, they lose their luminosity. That’s the beginning of the fall.

This is symbolic for the way in which a lot of becomings seem appealing at the beginning, and part of the mind says, “Well, hey, what about this? Haven’t tried this one in a long time.” Then you fall for it. And you really fall—way down. The more you go after it, the more you change in a worse direction. So you have to watch out.

Cravings can take us all kinds of places. The Buddha’s image is of a fire going from one house to another, and it can go because the fire clings to the wind. In the same way, the mind clings to craving as it goes from this body to another one. And we know what the wind is like. It can blow anywhere. So you want to train the mind so that it’s not fooled by any kind of craving. We do work with the desire to get the mind to settle down. We work with the desire to develop the path. But you have to hold to that desire and fight off everything else, because it’s only in that way that there can be some guarantee of safety for you. Craving may seem playful, but its consequences can be serious. And you have to take them seriously as well.