

# *A Slave to Craving*

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Ajaan Suwat once made the comment that we have everything all mixed up. We look at suffering or pain as an enemy. And we look at craving as our friend. When suffering comes, we push it away or we run away from it. But when craving comes, we tend to tag along.

There's a sutta where the Buddha says that everywhere we go, we go with craving as our companion. So we think that craving is a friend. It's always there with its arm around us. But as that passage we chanted just now reminds us, we're actually slaves to our craving. It's as if everywhere we go craving has us on a leash, pulling us this way, pulling us that. And as the Buddha noted, craving takes its delight now here and now there. There's nothing really steady or dependable about it. You want this taste here. You want that sight there. You want this experience over there. It's as if it's yanking you around all the time.

And it's because of your likes and dislikes that it has you on that leash. You want pleasure, so it promises you pleasure. You're afraid of pain, so it threatens you with pain. If you don't follow your cravings, it's going to be horrible. You're going to be miserable: That's what it says. And we're not helped by the fact that modern psychology tells us if you don't go along with your desires, you're going to get all twisted and weird. And so we run along after the craving, even though it's never really produced anything that we could really hold onto for any length of time.

Where are the pleasures that you experienced yesterday? Or last week? Or the year before? They're like the vapor of your breath on a lacquer tray. You breathe on the lacquer, and barely a second later it's gone. But the vapor on the lacquer tray at least doesn't leave a trace. Sometimes the memory of your past pleasures actually leaves a bad taste in your mouth. The things you did to get those pleasures, or simply the fact that they're not coming back.

So what can you do to get beyond this slavery to craving? You've got to learn how to look, take a good hard look at pleasure and pain. Where is genuine pleasure and what is pain like? Why are you so afraid of it? To really understand these things, you have to get the mind in the right place. This is why we're sitting here meditating, so we can take a good look at pleasure, we can take a good look at pain, and come to understand them.

When you really understand, then craving doesn't have any power over you. You cut the leash. You see how empty its promises are, and you see how empty its threats are. In other words, when you understand pleasure, you realize where genuine pleasure lies—and it doesn't lie in the pictures you create of it. Real pleasure is very different. It's something very quiet and cool here in the mind. It requires training to experience the pleasure that's really dependable and blameless, one that doesn't harm you, that doesn't harm other people, doesn't lead to intoxication. It's cool pleasure. It comes simply allowing the mind to be still for a while, not yanking it around.

Or you can stay with the breath and the breath is interesting enough, gratifying enough, pleasurable enough, so that the promise of other pleasures

doesn't really pull you off course. This is part of the Buddha's strategy to show you there really are better pleasures that you can find here inside that don't cost any money. You don't put yourself in a position where somebody can catch you, like that peacock the other day. If that peacock hadn't been addicted to that birdseed, we would never have gotten it into the cage.

And you look at the human society, the way people cheat other people: It's usually the person who's looking for a quick buck or a quick pleasure who gets taken advantage of. So you're a lot safer if you can find a sense of pleasure inside. As the Buddha says, when the mind is settled in concentration and is satisfied, when it has a sense of enjoying being here, Mara can't find you. Mara can't see you. This is even before you've gained awakening.

So this is a safe pleasure. Once you see a safe and blameless pleasure, then you can look at the other pleasures you've had, and weigh them for what they really are. All those images the Buddha has in the Canon about the drawbacks of sensual pleasure: It's like carrying a torch against the wind. If you don't let go of it, it's going to burn you. Or like a hawk that's found a piece of meat. It flies off with the meat, and all the other hawks and kites and crows come and attack it. If it doesn't let go of the piece of meat, it's going to get killed. It's going to become a piece of meat itself.

A lot of these images are pretty harsh. I know a lot of people don't like them, because they really want to stay stuck on their old pleasures. But when you come from a different position, there is something really gratifying about listening to those images. It confirms what you've already seen, that the pleasure of jhana, the pleasure of concentration, is really a much better form of pleasure. And you are better off not running after those other things.

This is one way in which you begin to cut the leash that craving has on the heart. When mind is solid enough, then you can start looking at pain, either physical pain or emotional pain. If you're coming from a position of wellbeing so that you're not pushing it away, you can actually see it for what it is. For example, pain in the body—we tend to get everything all glommed together. If there's a pain in your hip or a pain in your back, the pain and the hip and the pain and the back tend to get melded together so that the hip seems to be pain, and the back seems to be pain.

What you've done is you've taken different sorts of sensations and glued them together. On the one hand, you've got physical sensations: sensations of solidity—what they call earth; liquidity—water; warmth—fire; energy—breath, or wind. Those things are purely physical. And then on top of that, there are the sensations of pain. If you glue the pain to the earth element or the sense of solidity of your body, the pain seems solid and it becomes a lot more unbearable. But if you actually look at it, and say, "Okay, which is the actual pain and which is the sensation of solidity?" you see that they are different things. And the pain is very erratic. It moves. Comes and goes, very, very quickly. If the mind is still enough and you can look carefully enough, you can begin to see: Okay, when it moves in this way, it's because there's this perception in the mind. When the perception gets dropped, that particular pain gets dropped as well. Even though there may be a physical cause for the pain, it moves around a lot. And your perceptions try to keep up with it. And they form a bridge, from the physical pain into the heart.

If you can cut that bridge, sometimes there's the weird sensation of the pain actually going back into the heart and disappearing. In other words, it's the threat of pain that comes out of the heart that's been making you suffer. And even if the actual physical pain doesn't go away, when you can cut the bridge, you find that the heart can sit there in the midst of physical pain and not really be disturbed by it.

This way you come to understand the pain, you come to understand pleasure. When you understand these things, the promises of craving lose a lot of their appeal, the threats lose a lot of their power. You can cut the leash, so you're no longer a slave. You're not being yanked around here and there. You've seen this false friend for what it is: your slave master and a very heartless and demanding one at that.

But if you can really understand the principles of pleasure and pain and the actual motions and activities of pleasure and pain, you can get yourself out of slavery. This is why, as Ajaan Suwat said, you have to take pain as your friend, because you're going to learn an important lesson from it. But to be friends with pain, you need skill. That's the skill we're working on right now: the skill of getting the mind to be still, getting it to be mindful, concentrated, discerning.

I know a lot of people who don't like these teachings because they sound harsh, but the only way you're going to get the mind out of its complacency is to show it stark reality. You think you've got this friend, but it's your slave master. And the thing you've been running away from all the time is the thing if you actually turn around and look into it, is going to set you free.