

A Slave to Craving

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Those four Dhamma summaries that we chanted just now: The first three are pretty general observations. Aging, illness, and death are basically what they come down to. These are things that everybody notices. The world is swept away: Things you did when you were younger, you can't do anymore as you get older. It offers no shelter: When you experience pain, you have to experience it yourself. You can't share it out with others, saying, "Could you lighten my pain by taking some of it on?" Each person has his or her own pain. One has to pass on leaving everything behind: Here in the West we have that in the saying, "You can't take it with you." All that is pretty ordinary.

These are things that people notice. Sometimes they take them seriously; sometimes they notice them and pretend like they don't happen—but they're there. What brings these observations under the four noble truths is the fourth Dhamma summary: We're a slave to craving. We don't have enough. We live through this life with all its setbacks and problems, yet we keep coming back. And depending on how we've handled the setbacks, sometimes we come back in a better situation, sometimes we come back worse—and yet we keep going for it, regardless.

Ajaan Mun talked about how he was able to remember a lot of his past lives, and there was one period where for five hundred consecutive lives he was a dog. He was just really satisfied being a dog. You can imagine having a memory like that. What in the mind would want to go back to be a dog? Well, it's insatiable; it'll take whatever it can get, this mind. So it's up to us to train it, to train that craving, because who knows where it's going to lead us.

The Buddha's image is of a fire: One house is burning, and the wind can carry the fire to another house, and who knows how many houses it can go to. What you want to do is to learn how to starve that fire of its fuel, starve that craving of its fuel. And it starts with a pretty simple set of practices, in the practice of merit.

"Merit" is the traditional translation for *puñña*; traditional in the sense that it's been going on for over a hundred years. A better translation would be "goodness." There are many passages where *puñña* is contrasted with *pāpa*, or evil, so it's goodness. This is an area of the Buddhist practice that tends to get overlooked in the West.

People go to meditation retreats and they go straight for the experience. They say, “I want to have a good experience on this retreat,” without realizing that in the context of the teachings, you don’t go straight to the meditation. You start with generosity, move up to virtue, and develop goodwill. That’s how you begin meditating: meditating on goodwill. All of these things teach you important lessons that you can then bring properly to the meditation.

The lesson of generosity, or of giving, is that giving does have its rewards, but to gain those rewards, you have to give first.

Generosity also teaches you that there are gradations of pleasure. There’s the pleasure of keeping something and consuming it yourself. There’s the pleasure of giving it away, and being able to talk to yourself about how good it is to be able to give something away.

That ability to talk to yourself in a skillful way: That’s a good talent to have when you’re going to meditate, so that you can take a cheerful attitude to the setbacks, realizing that you put in the effort, and it may not show itself quite yet, but you can trust that, at some point, it will. That’s a lesson you first learn from generosity.

But you can also learn from generosity how to enjoy the act of being generous, in and of itself, with the knowledge that you’re doing something good. That requires that you learn how to talk to yourself in a convincing way. This ability to talk to yourself that way will also stand you in good stead when there are setbacks that come as you meditate.

As for virtue, that teaches you the value of restraint: There are things you might like to do, but you learn how to say No, and you can say No in an effective manner. Here again, you may not enjoy saying No at first, but you know that it’s going to be for your long-term welfare and happiness.

There’s a passage where a layperson comes to see Ven. Ānanda and says, “How is it that the monks can give up sensuality? I think about it, and my heart doesn’t leap up at the idea at all.” And Ānanda says, “Let’s go talk to the Buddha about this.”

So they go see the Buddha, and the Buddha tells them that he himself, when he started practicing and realized that in order to get the mind into good concentration he was going to have to give up sensuality—thoughts of this sensual pleasure, that sensual pleasure—his heart didn’t leap up. But it was when he talked to himself about the rewards of how you can get the mind still, and the usefulness of having a still mind, that he was willing to make the sacrifice.

So it’s a good lesson to learn, because you’re going to need that as you meditate. Ideas come into the mind and they see you have an open field here. A whole hour: You can sit here and

think about anything you want to, but what would be the best use of this hour? The best use would be to get the mind to settle down, to gain some discipline. If you have some experience with virtue, then it's going to be a lot easier. Again, a lot of this has to do with how you talk to yourself.

Then there's the development of goodwill. We tend to think of goodwill as an expansive mind-state, but the Buddha calls it a form of restraint. In your search for happiness, there will be certain things you simply can't do if you have goodwill for others. There are certain things you can't do if you have goodwill for yourself. The whole point of developing goodwill is that it prevents you from doing a lot of unskillful things.

So all these forms of goodness are a restraint on your craving. You learn how to bring your craving in line so that it doesn't just go anywhere. Most of us, when we die, are like a glob of mercury that someone hits with a hammer. It just goes every direction. In other words, the little pseudopods of craving will move out who knows where, and they can latch on to anything—whichever one is strongest, it will tend to pull the mind there.

It's like the image of the six animals tied to leashes and then the leashes are all tied to one another. You've got a crocodile, a bird, a dog, a jackal, a snake, and a monkey, and each of them will try to go to its favorite place. The mind has that tendency to want to reach out in all sorts of different directions all at once, but one of the animals will be stronger than the others. In this case, it's probably the crocodile; it wants to go down to the river, and it's going to drag everybody else down there, too, and they'll all probably drown. So you have to look out: Where are the crocodiles in your mind? Where are they heading?

The Buddha says you need to tie those leashes to a post. Then you can get the animals under control. This is why we meditate: The post stands for mindfulness immersed in the body. Now, that could mean focusing on the breath, it could mean going through those 32 parts of the body, realizing you've got this human birth, you've got this human body, what are you going to do with it?

Are you going to let it be a tool for your sensuality, or are you going to learn to look at what you've really got here? If you took off the skin, what would you have? If you peeled away the flesh, what would you have? Nothing really of any substance, nothing of any essence, nothing that you would want to get worked up about.

Yet, because the mind *wants* to get worked up—because it's a slave to craving—it tells itself, "Well, even this is good enough, I'll go for it." But look at what it leads you to do. Usually

it's because of our own attraction to our own body, our possessiveness of our own body, that we start looking around for other bodies, other sensual pleasures that get us intoxicated.

So the Buddha says that if you want to tame your eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and mind, you've got to focus on the body. At the very least, have this as your center, with a sense of well-being here. That contemplation of the body's parts: It's not meant to make you hate the body; it's just to remind you that this is a tool you've got, and what's the best use of this tool? You can use that as an object of concentration. You can use it as a tool for getting some order in your craving, bringing your cravings in line—so that you can be a little bit more reliable. So that you can get yourself, as the Buddha says, “rightly directed.”

So it's that fourth Dhamma summary: That's the one that gives you a handle on the other ones. You realize the problem is not so much them. It's the craving that's willing to put up with them—and come back for more of them. This is where you've got to focus your efforts.

Of course the “should” here, is nothing that anybody is imposing on you, but *suffering* is imposing it on you. But don't look at it as an imposition; look at it as a wake-up call.

There's work to be done, and the Buddha's giving you focus for your work. This is where it's best done. And he's pointing this out to you because of his goodwill, his compassion—it's a gift. Remember, he could have chosen not to teach at all.

There's that story about how, after his awakening, he stopped to think that this Dhamma he had found was really subtle. He wondered if anybody would understand it, and if teaching would be just a waste of effort.

The commentaries don't like this story. They say that he didn't really mean those thoughts, he was just being coy because he wanted an invitation to teach. Which he got, but I think that the story points to fact that because he was fully awakened, he didn't owe anything anymore to anybody else. He was under no compulsion, which means that the fact that he *did* teach is even more amazing. It was totally a free gift.

So try to regard these teachings as a gift. This was one of the reasons why he instituted the Sangha—so that we could have an institution where the Dhamma continued to be taught as a gift, not as an imposition, but as an act of compassion. Think about what that implies about where you are. You're in a position where you need somebody else's compassion. You need the Buddha's compassion because otherwise you're a slave.

Think about the king in that passage. He says, “What do you mean ‘slave’? I'm not a slave, I'm a king.” And the monk who was explaining these Dhamma summaries to him says,

“Suppose someone were to come from the east, and say that there’s a kingdom to the east with lots of wealth, lots of things you could take. In a military sense, it’s very weak. With your army, you could conquer it? Would you go for it?”

“Well, yes.”

Here the king’s 80 years old and yet he’s willing to fight for another kingdom.

“How about if another kingdom to the west?” “Well, sure.” “To the north?” “Yes.” “To the south?” “Yes.” “On the other side of the ocean?” “Yes.” And the monk says, “That’s what I meant by ‘a slave to craving.’”

It’s this sense of not having had enough, not having enough: That’s what drives us. So the Buddha’s solution is not simply to say, “Well, just be content where you are.” It’s to say that there’s something in the mind you can attain that *will* have a sense of enough. It truly will be enough, more than enough. And there’s a path that leads there—but it’ll require that you tame your cravings.

So look at that teaching as good news, a gift, because there are so many people in the world who don’t listen to it, and they suffer because of that. Right here’s the gift. Make the most of it.