

Wild Horses

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When the Buddha identified the cause of suffering, he didn't define it as a blanket craving for things to be different from what they are. After all, the desire to develop skillful qualities, the desire to prevent unskillful qualities from arising, the desire to get rid of unskillful qualities that are there: Those are good desires. Those are actually part of the path.

The Buddha actually identified the cause of suffering as three specific kinds of craving that he said led to further becoming. Now, the term 'further becoming' can refer to new states of becoming in your mind as you go from one thought world to the next to the next, but it's also his word for rebirth. Remember that image he had of how, when you're reborn, it's like a house afire, and the flame goes from the house, carried by the wind, to another house. The wind there stands for craving. Just as the fire clings to the wind, the mind clings to the craving. That's what carries you on. It might sound good that you can go where you crave to go, but craving, like wind, can go in some pretty strange places.

Think about what it's going to be like when you die. You find that you can't stay in this body. There's going to be a fear that you'll have to leave your sensual pleasures, and so the mind latches on to any sensual idea that comes its way. That's dangerous because you can latch on to all kinds of sensuality. There's deva sensuality of course, but there's also human sensuality and animal sensuality. Who know where you're going to go if you don't have any control over your mind?

As for craving for becoming, you feel that you're going to lose your identity, and you want to find a new identity. Again, if you're really desperate, you'll latch on to anything.

Then there's craving for non-becoming. Say you're in a lot of pain when you die, or there's a lot of mental anguish from leaving your family, leaving your loved ones, and all you can think about is how you'd like to have everything snuffed out. You'd rather be obliterated than continue suffering. That can take you to some pretty strange places, too.

There's a state called the state of non-perception where you totally blank out, and you stay blanked out for quite a long time. Then you come out, and as one Thai ajaan said, you're *bam bam, boe boe*: You don't have all your wits about you, because the mind has been suppressed for so long.

So even though craving is what takes you, it's not necessarily going to take you to places where you'd really want to go. Because on top of that there's fear.

The Buddha lists four kinds of fear around death: There's fear of losing sensuality. There's fear of losing your body. There's fear of punishment: You think about the unskillful things you've done, and often these things will come to the mind as you're dying. You suddenly realize that things you did a long time ago could leave you open to punishment. It's a scary idea.

Finally, there's the fear that comes from what the Buddha describes as not knowing the true Dhamma. In other words, you don't really know what's going to happen after you die: Where are you going to go? Will you be annihilated? Will you be forced to go someplace you don't want to go? You really don't know. There's a big blank facing you, and that can be scary, too.

Of course, it's scary because of your craving. In fact, each of these fears is related to the craving that leads to further becoming. Fear of losing sensuality is, of course, related to craving for sensuality. Fear of losing the body is related both to sensuality and craving for becoming, in the sense that your body is a large part of your sense of yourself, and you're afraid that you're going to lose your means for finding sensual pleasures. Fear of punishment is also related to craving for sensuality. You crave pleasure, but you're afraid you're going to end up with pain. You'll be taken to a realm that you don't want to go, so craving for becoming is also involved.

As for the fear that comes from not knowing the true Dhamma, that affects all the three forms of craving. You may want to be annihilated, but you may not be. You may want to be reborn, but you're afraid because you have no idea whether it's really going to happen or—if it does—where you'll be reborn.

So all these forms of fear come from the fact that you don't know if your cravings will be satisfied or not. You feel powerless in the face of death. You realize how little you can control. In turn, they can drive your cravings in some pretty strange and undesirable directions.

The *ajans* talk about how sudden and unexpected death can be, and how disorienting. Ajaan Chah compares it to sitting there, minding your own business, and all of a sudden someone comes up with a big burlap sack, throws it over your head, carries you off, and throws you out someplace else—totally beyond your control.

So you have to work on these cravings, and substitute them with the desires of the path. This is where another form of fear comes in—although actually, it's a fear that's useful, and the Buddha recommends it: It's called *ottappa*, or compunction. It's the sense that your actions

really do matter, and you've got to be very careful about what you do and say and think. Compunction is very closely related to heedfulness. And the Buddha often ties it with ardency.

So compunction is the fear that motivates right effort. And unlike the unskillful forms of fear, which come from a sense of powerlessness, this is a fear that comes with from sense of power. In other words, you realize you *do* have the ability to make a difference through your actions. You want to make the best use of that power, because you know that if you misuse it, there's going to be trouble. So you try to develop the skillful qualities that will help protect you against those four kinds of fear.

For example, fear of losing out on the sensual pleasures you've had: The Buddha says you can't really pry yourself lose of sensual pleasures until you've found a pleasure that's not related to sensuality. This is the pleasure of concentration.

As you sit here focused on the breath, you can get the breath really comfortable as you explore how the breathing process feels in the body. That feeling of comfort, even though it can be very intense, is not counted as a sensual pleasure. Even though it's related to the body, it's not counted as a sensual pleasure; it's the pleasure of *form*: the body as it relates to the elements of earth, water, wind, and fire inside. In other words, the solidity, the coolness, warmth, energy: You can work with these things and get them balanced in a way that feels gratifying. This can help pry you lose of your attachment to sensuality.

As for your attachment to the body, this is why we have contemplation of the body. You can imagine taking it apart in your mind, all those different parts, and putting them on the floor in front of you. Then you ask yourself, "Okay, which part do you want to identify with? Which one are you afraid of losing? Are any of them worth holding on to?"

At the same time, you want to develop your concentration, so that you can get to some of the formless realms. For example, when the breath settles down, there's a sense of fullness in the breath energy in the body. Everything is balanced and still, and without the movement of the breath, you have a sense that the boundary of the body begins to disappear. Your sense of the body is like a mist of sensation dots, and you realize that between the dots of the mist there's space. If your concentration and mindfulness are strong enough, you can focus on the perception of space, and you realize that you don't have to keep focusing on the body.

The body is there if you want to create a sensation of the body again out of those dots of sensation. You can do that. But you also have the choice of going for the space. This experience helps to weaken your attachment to the body.

As for fear of punishment, the Buddha reminds you that you may have done things bad in the past, but that doesn't mean you have to go to a bad destination. If you start doing good things in the meantime and develop right view, that can take you in a good direction.

What he advises is this: You recognize a mistake for the mistake it was, and then develop thoughts of goodwill to all beings. That helps to strengthen your right view, and your resolve not to do anything harmful again. Goodwill can also provide a really good dwelling place for the mind—as you face death with no ill will for anyone.

Finally, the fear that comes from not knowing the true Dhamma is resolved only at stream-entry, when you see for yourself that the Buddha was right: There is a deathless element that can be attained through human effort. In the meantime, though, you can work in the direction of overcoming that fear by paying very careful attention of the qualities of your mind.

This is where the practice of compunction and heedfulness comes in. As you work on developing skillful qualities, you realize that they really do have a good impact. As you let go of unskillful qualities, it does have a good impact. The mind in the present moment is a lot more free, and the impact of that change ripples out in your life.

You get more and more confident that the Buddha was right about this. So maybe he's right about rebirth; maybe he's right about the effects of kamma over the long-term. This doesn't totally resolve your doubts, but it moves you in the right direction.

So try to replace fear of death with fear of being unskillful.

I heard someone the other night talk about how if you strive and strive and strive in your practice, it creates unskillful qualities in the mind, a strong sense of self, so you should just let things ride as they are: Whatever—skillful or unskillful—comes up, just be okay with it. But that attitude doesn't take you anywhere at all—at least it doesn't take you anywhere new.

If you really want to overcome your sense of self, you dedicate yourself to developing skillful qualities no matter what you might like to do. You tell yourself, "I'm just going to do what's skillful, abandon what's unskillful." That way, you overcome your laziness. You overcome your preferences for doing just what you like right here, right now. You think about the long term. In that way, your unskillful senses of self get trained, brought back into line. Ultimately, it's a lot easier to let go of a skillful sense of self than it is to let go of one that's up and down, sometimes skillful, sometimes not—a self that's lazy and doesn't want to do the work.

So don't be afraid of developing too much of a sense of self around the activity of striving

in your meditation. It's the striving that sorts out your senses of self, so that you can hold on to the good ones.

That's what the practice of compunction, the practice of heedfulness, can do for you, so that you can approach death with a lot less fear, with a lot more control over your cravings, control over your fears—so you don't succumb. Instead, you come out victorious.

I had a friend back in high school who said that she hoped that at her obituary they didn't say that she had *succumbed*. It sounds like you're defeated. You want to come out winning.

The ideal victory, of course, is not coming back at all. But failing that, if you have some control over your cravings, you're like the image in the Dhammapada of the person who can control the chariot—the wild horses of your mind. The person who can exert control over the mind: That's the true charioteer. Other people just hold the reins. In other words, they let the horses go wherever they want to go. But you want your horses to take you to a place you'd be happy to go. This is one of the reasons why we meditate: to get some control over the wild horses of the mind and to get them tamed.