

Abandoning Craving

February 7, 2023

When I was teaching English composition in Chiang Mai University, back when I was a lay person, I had a class that was mainly made up of Social Science majors. So we decided, as part of the class, to do analysis of social problems. As I pointed out to the class, they already had in their own culture a really good way of approaching social problems: the same way that the Buddha approached the problem of suffering. You don't solve the problem at the symptoms, you solve it at the cause. You comprehend suffering, but you don't let go of the suffering. You let go of the cause, which is craving: three kinds of craving—craving for sensuality, craving for becoming, craving for non-becoming.

So it's good to think about how we go about abandoning the cause of suffering. The Buddha gives a little bit of a hint. He says you have to find its location. Where does craving grow? That's where you put it out. That's where you abandon it. It grows in things like sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, our feelings around these things, our perceptions around these things, thoughts, acts of evaluation around these things, even craving for craving for these things.

When you see that you're suffering, first you have to remember, "Okay, what is the suffering itself?" This is why you have to comprehend it. You see that it's at the clinging to the five aggregates.

And the way we cling to the five aggregates seems to have a lot of reality. In fact, much of our sense of reality operates around that. We cling in terms of sensuality, and we use the aggregates for fantasizing about sensual pleasures. Then, of course, there's the pleasure we're focused on. Then there are views about the world: that this is how the world works, our version of the reality principle. Then there are our views about what you should do within that world, along with the sense of who you are in that world who will find that pleasure.

You can see that all these things are the raw materials for a state of becoming, centered on a desire for a particular pleasure. There's a world in which that pleasure exists. You're a person in that world, and now you have to figure out the steps you're going to follow in order to get what you want. All of that is suffering.

It's really ironic: Right where we think we're gaining pleasure, gaining satisfaction, the Buddha said that that's where the suffering is. So you have to ask yourself, "Okay, what's the clinging there? Which particular type of

clinging are you engaging in that's causing you to suffer?" Sometimes it's one of the four; sometimes it's all four together.

You have to ask yourself, "What would cause you to crave that?" Of course, it's the idea that you're going to find satisfaction there. But where is that sense of satisfaction? Is it in the sight, the sound, smell, taste, tactile sensation? Is it in the feelings that arise at the senses? Is it in your perception around those things? And your perception of what? The perception of the object? The perception of yourself possessing that object?

This is a principle that's used a lot in advertising. Years back there was a commercial for the BMW Chill. A guy comes up to a rooftop of a car garage and there, in the midst of all old these jalopies, he spots his beautiful BMW. He just shivers with pride and delight—and you want to shoot him. But there are people who buy their BMW because of that, because it makes them feel good, better than other people. So the desire is not focused on the BMW. It's focused on the chill: the feeling, the story you can tell yourself about how you have the money and the good taste in cars to be a BMW owner. That kind of thing.

Then there's craving for craving. As the Buddha said, we go through life with craving as our friend. We feel it's going to provide us satisfaction, so we crave more of it.

When you find yourself suffering about something—say it's a physical illness, a situation in society, a situation in your home—then once you've figured out what you're clinging to, you have to ask yourself exactly where your craving is focused. Where is the desire? As the Buddha said, the main desires will come in terms of sensuality: your fascination with thinking about sensual pleasures and planning for sensual pleasures, as when you're planning a meal or planning to go to a restaurant, and you ask yourself, "What dishes am I going to order today?" You run through the various options. A lot of the pleasure in food is actually right there: in running through the options and your associations with different kinds of food.

Then there's craving for becoming: wanting to take a role in the world where that pleasure is found.

And then craving for non-becoming: Once you've taken on that role, you decide you don't like it. You want it to be destroyed.

Now, these three forms of cravings come on really strong at the time of death. If you're in pain, you'll be thinking about the sensual pleasures you want, the sensual pleasures you don't have but you'd like to have. One common way of escaping the pain is to think about different sensual pleasures, and you don't want that ability to think about sensual pleasure to be taken away from you. Or you're afraid at death that you're going to be annihilated, so you're willing to latch on to any opportunity to continue becoming. Or

maybe you're looking back on your life and you feel that it's just been a lot of pain for nothing.

I had a student one time who, one night during his meditation, was able to remember ten lifetimes. At the end of each lifetime, his heart kept exclaiming, "Oh, the suffering! Oh, the suffering!" And often in a case like that, all you can think about is, "Wouldn't it be good just to have everything just snuffed out?" That's craving for non-becoming, which, as the Buddha said, is close to dispassion, but it actually leads to more becoming because you have a perception about how much you'd like that. You latch on to that perception and you actually create a new becoming around it.

So these are the desires you've got to watch out for that can cause suffering. Now, this doesn't mean that all desire is bad. After all, the desire to abandon unskillful qualities, the desire to develop skillful qualities, is part of the path. Sometimes you hear that the cause of suffering is the craving for things to be other than they are, the idea being that if you'd simply accept things as they are, you'd be okay. But craving is based on our experience that the things we want will sometimes come true. It's not the case that all you have to do is to accept whatever's coming up and not want it to be different. You've got to follow the whole path, and that requires the desire to follow it.

The question is: Which desires for change will be actually useful in putting an end to suffering, and which ones will just cause more suffering? And, of course, there is some suffering on the path. It's a painful path sometimes. But it's pain with a purpose, not like the pain that just goes into more and more craving for becoming, non-becoming, craving for sensuality. The pain comes from those forms of craving doesn't serve a purpose. But a purpose is served when you realize, "Okay, I'm engaging in unskillful qualities here, and I want to stop." You start looking at them more carefully to see, "Well, what's the attraction?"

That's your first question: Where's the attraction? And why is it attractive? Are you attracted to the idea of craving itself, or are you attracted to a particular perception about you or the object you want, or the state of being you want, or a particular narrative? If that's where you're going, you're going the wrong place.

Focus your desires on qualities of mind that will get you out: mindfulness, alertness, ardency, concentration, discernment. These are all good things to desire. That kind of desire for change is actually part of the path.

So look to see where the suffering is and why you would desire it. We don't think we desire suffering, but that's what the Buddha says, and that's what's so ironic about what he says: Precisely where you think you're going to find satisfaction is where you're actually clinging and causing yourself suffering. So

you have to look: “Well, why would I crave that?” It’s because you don’t see clearly what’s going on.

This is why we have to meditate, and this is why the path is a path to the end of craving. You get the mind still, and you start seeing these things in action. As I was saying last night, as you practice concentration, you get a better and better sense of the aggregates and a better sense of the different operations that go into creating a thought-world. You get to have a chance to see precisely where you’re attracted to something, because otherwise it’s a blur.

Ajaan Chah’s image is of falling from a limb on a very tall tree. You go past each of the individual lower limbs on your way to the ground, but you can’t name them, saying, “Well, that’s that limb, and that’s this limb,” because you’re falling so fast. But as you get the mind into concentration, things begin to slow down, and you can actually see the steps. It’s like floating down from the tree. You can see: “Oh there’s that limb, and then there’s that limb, and then there’s that one.” You can see precisely, “Oh, this is where my craving is focused.” And when you can see where it’s really focused, you can often see that it’s pretty dumb.

Ajaan Suwat would often say that when the Buddha talks about ignorance, it’s a fancy word for stupidity. We’re really stupid in our way of going for pleasure. We’re actually creating suffering out of what we think is where pleasure is going to be found.

So try to get the mind as still as you can so that you can observe these things. It’s one thing to talk about them and hear them mapped out. It’s only when you can actually look and see, “Okay, this is where the craving is, that’s where the clinging is, this is how the craving causes that clinging, how it causes you to cling to sensuality, how it causes you to cling to views or habits and practices, or to a sense of yourself”: That’s when you’ll see through it and see that it’s not worth it. Again, this is all about value judgements.

That’s another strange teaching you sometimes hear, that the Buddha doesn’t want you to engage in value judgements. Just accept things as they are. But if the teaching were all about acceptance, it wouldn’t be the teaching it is. Yes, you do have to accept the way things are, but then you also have to accept the fact that you can change the way things are. You can manipulate this pattern of cause-and-effect that the Buddha discovered. You can manipulate it for the sake of putting an end to your suffering. That’s what the path is all about, why it’s something you develop. So work on the developing so that you can let go of the craving, because that’s where the problem originates, and that’s where it’s going to be solved.