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Meditation Group
See for Yourself

Craving and Letting Go

Craving Consumers

-Thanissaro Bhikkhu

The Buddha often speaks of life in the world as an uneven path that constantly challenges us to walk evenly. Each day countless obstacles threaten to obstruct us, to divert us, to knock us off balance, and steady mindfulness and firm determination are needed to avoid losing our way in the dark sidetracks of greed and anger. To stumble may be inevitable until we reach the great highway of the noble ones, but with a clear vision of the goal and diligent effort we can avoid tumbling into the ditches that line the road.

If the task of practicing the Dhamma while living in the world has always been difficult, our modern commercial culture has increased that difficulty acutely. No longer is it the case that the desires to be tamed by Dhamma practice are the simple, relatively innocent urges implanted in us by nature or stimulated by a basic subsistence economy. Like unsuspecting fish caught in a net, we move within the coils of a global social and economic order predicated on the premise that the essential human activity is the production and consumption of commodities. From the standpoint of this system, the final good of human life is to enjoy goods, and the combined ingenuity of laboratory researchers and business magnates ensures that the goods to be enjoyed pour forth in inexhaustible variety.

The law that governs the global economic order is a simple one: never allow desire to abate. The media of communication, our modern miracle workers, employ every strategy at their disposal to ensure that this calamity will not befall us. Through an uninterrupted series of messages they contrive to inflame our fantasies and titillate our appetites with an intensity that would banish the word “enough” from our vocabulary. But despite its mammoth dimensions and global reach, the entire corporate culture rests upon a pervasive illusion that has become so widespread that it seems almost a self-evident truth. This is the idea that happiness is proportional to the quantity and monetary value of our possessions. We are led to believe that by extending our financial assets, by acquiring ownership over more and more goods, we thereby come closer to the good, to becoming happier, more contented, more deeply fulfilled human beings.

Yet this belief, this assumption so rarely questioned, is precisely the magical trick, the sleight-of-hand deception, that creates the prison cage of our misery. For so long as we seek happiness by trying to quench desire, the more we strengthen our bondage to the implacable demands of desire. The Suttas compare this process to the attempt to slake thirst by drinking sea water: far from eliminating thirst, the sea water will only increase it.

At the heart of the consumerist culture we find this puzzling paradox, that when we pursue wealth as an end in itself, instead of arriving at true happiness we only seem further removed from it. This conclusion is easily confirmed if we examine the lives of those who come closest to fulfilling the consumerist dream.

> Those who enjoy the most abundant wealth and exercise the greatest power are rarely models of contentment. To the contrary, they often live on the edge of despair and can avoid slipping over the edge only by kindling again and again the quest for more wealth, more power, and more pleasure in a viciously degrading cycle.

When we reflect on this situation in the light of the Buddha’s Teaching, the reason for the perpetual failure of consumerism stands forth in clear relief. The reason, as the Buddha tells us so succinctly, is that craving is the cause of suffering. By its own nature craving is insatiable, and thus the more our personal lives are governed by the assumption that the gratification of craving is the way to happiness, the more we are bound to reap disappointment. When an entire society is founded upon the principles of consumerism, upon the drive to produce and sell without concern for genuine human needs, the outcome may well be catastrophic.

According to the Buddha’s Teaching the way to genuine happiness does not lie in the indulgence of desire but in uncovering and eliminating the cause of suffering, which in practical terms means the control and removal of craving. To adopt such an approach is not a matter of forcing oneself into the mold of a cold puritanical asceticism. The Dhamma is a gradual teaching which instructs us how to order our lives in ways that are

immediately rewarding and gratifying. It does not promote personal development by demands for repression and self-affliction, but by gently offering us practical guidelines applicable to our present circumstances, guidelines that help us grow toward genuine happiness and peace.

For those involved in civilian life, seeking to raise a family and to forge their fortune within the world, the Buddha does not enjoin ascetic withdrawal from social and civil obligations. He recommends, rather, a life regulated by moral values aimed at the cultivation of wholesome qualities of mind. To his lay disciples he does not even decry the accumulation of wealth or extol poverty as a preferred alternative. He recommends only that wealth be acquired by right livelihood and be utilized in meaningful ways to promote the happiness of oneself and others.

In his advice to the village headman Rasiya (SN 42:12) the Buddha describes three praiseworthy qualities in a householder who enjoys sense pleasures: he acquires wealth righteously; he makes himself happy and comfortable with the wealth thus earned; and he shares his wealth and does meritorious deeds. The practice of meritorious deeds introduces a spiritual dimension to the proper employment of wealth, a dimension based on the recognition that greater happiness comes from giving than from gaining. To give is not only a way to reduce our greed and attachment, not only a way to acquire merit productive of future benefits, but a directly visible source of joy which provides immediate confirmation of the central pillar on which the entire Dhamma rests: that the path to happiness is one of relinquishment rather than one of accumulation.

But while the Buddha praises the virtuous householder who possesses the above three qualities, he does not stop there. He introduces a fourth quality which distinguishes the virtuous lay followers into two groups: on one side, those who enjoy sense pleasures while remaining tied to them, blind to the danger and unaware of an escape; on the other, those who enjoy sense pleasures without being tied to them, seeing the danger and aware of an escape. It is the second of these that the Buddha declares superior. This pronouncement offers us an insight into the Buddha's final solution to the challenge posed by consumerism. The final solution is not a limp compromise between indulgence and virtue but a bold, decisive step in the direction of detachment, an inner renunciation that enables one to rise above the whole round of production and consumption even while living within its boundaries. The incentive for this movement comes from seeing the danger: that there is no stable happiness to be gained by the pursuit of sense pleasures, that sense pleasures "give little satisfaction and are productive of much suffering." Its completion comes from recognizing an escape: that the removal of desire and lust brings an unshakable peace and freedom that is not contingent upon external circumstances.

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The End of Suffering

- Joseph Goldstein

Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of the cessation of dukkha: the remainderless fading and cessation, renunciation, relinquishment, release, and letting go of that very craving.

—Samyutta Nikaya 56:11

This statement from the Buddha is a very clear and unambiguous declaration of what frees the mind. Can we even imagine a mind free of craving? We might resonate more easily with St. Augustine's famous prayer: "Dear Lord, please make me chaste, but not yet."

Some years ago, in reflecting on this third noble truth, I began to understand the Buddha's words in a new and more immediate way. Rather than understanding the end of craving only as some far-off goal, as the end of the path in the distant future, or as some special meditative state to try to sustain, I understood it as being a practice to experience right now, in each moment.

When we explore directly, in our experience, the meaning of the Buddha's declaration, we can see for ourselves how craving obscures the natural ease and openness of mind, and how in moments free of desire, wanting, and clinging, we can recognize the taste of happiness and peace. As a simple experiment, the next time you have some wanting or desire in the mind, investigate what the wanting feels like and then notice how it feels when the wanting passes away. Given the great law of impermanence, it always will.

Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche, one of the great Tibetan Dzogchen masters of the last century, spoke frequently of recognizing the nature of mind—its empty, aware nature, free of any clinging to anything—for short moments many times. This can become a framework for understanding our own practice of letting go of craving: short moments, many times. As we do this, we learn to recognize and increasingly trust this place of

ease.

Although there are different methods, vocabularies, and even metaphysical descriptions for the nature of ultimate freedom among the various Buddhist traditions, there is one common understanding of what frees the mind: liberation through non-clinging. This phrase is found throughout the Pali discourses and also in many of the teachings of the great Tibetan lamas and Chinese and Japanese Zen masters.

Ways to Abandon Craving

So the question for us is how to experience and practice this noncraving and nonclinging, first on a momentary level and then, in the end, as the unshakeable deliverance of mind, the cessation of craving without remainder. We can practice and accomplish this in various ways, and different Buddhist traditions highlight one or another of these methods.

Focus on the drawbacks of conditioned experience.

Regarding the end of craving, the Buddha made a very obvious but often overlooked observation: When we focus on the gratification that comes from sense pleasures, desire increases. When we focus on the drawbacks of sense pleasures, craving diminishes. But how often, in the midst of our involvement with the world of sense objects, do we pay attention to whether we are further conditioning or deconditioning craving? This would be an interesting practice to bring to the world and see what we could learn from it.

Notice how impermanence pervades our lives.

An increasingly refined awareness of the three characteristics leads to a disenchantment that frees the mind. Sometimes we're aware of one or another of these characteristics on a macro level. For me, reading history has been a powerful reminder of the changing, insubstantial nature of all we take to be so vitally important in our lives. Recently, I read a biography of Genghis Khan, who created the Mongol Empire in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. It was quite remarkable that this person who ruled most of Asia and even parts of Europe, whose word affected the lives of millions of people, is now just one more chapter in the rise and fall of empires, hardly thought about at all.

A deep reflection on this great truth of impermanence enlarges the context of our own experience and loosens the bonds of craving and attachment. It's the difference between the roller-coaster emotions of a child, with their many highs and lows in even just one day, and equanimity and wisdom that adults (ideally) develop about changing life circumstances. In the early years of my practice, when I would be going through a particularly difficult time, I would often imagine myself six months or a year in the future and know that at that time I would hardly remember what I was currently going through. It definitely helped to lessen the intensity of the dramas of the moment.

Cut through identification with the knowing mind.

Andrew Olendzki, a senior scholar at the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies, expressed it this way: "Consciousness is not a thing that exists, but an event that occurs."

In some Tibetan and Zen traditions, another approach is used to cut through any identification with knowing: looking for the mind itself. Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche would often instruct his students to look for the mind. Can you see it, taste it, touch it? When we look for it, there is nothing to find, and the not-finding is the finding. When we recognize that moment of not-finding, the mind's empty, selfless nature is revealed.

There is a powerful Zen dialogue that illuminates this point. The dialogue takes place between Bodhidharma, who is credited with bringing Buddhism to China in the fifth or sixth century, and Daizu Huike, who was to become his dharma heir. Legend has it that Bodhidharma had meditated in a cave for nine years when Huike came to him for teachings.

Huike said to Bodhidharma, "My mind is anxious. Please pacify it." To which Bodhidharma replied; "Bring me your mind, and I will pacify it." Huike said, "Although I've sought it, I cannot find it." Bodhidharma then said, "There, I have pacified your mind."

This is more than a witty Zen story. We can apply this wisdom at any time during the day, and perhaps especially when our minds are anxious, seeing that the empty, aware nature is always there, already pacified.