

Craving (*Taṇhā*)

A talk offered by Philip Jones to the Silent Mind-Open Heart Sangha on
09-08-2013.

Last week I spoke about our tendency to get lost in our thoughts, our tendency to have our thoughts build one upon another until we create a kind of virtual reality that we live within for some period of time. And I mentioned that in the Pāli this tendency to "mentally proliferate" is called *papañca*, which the commentaries to the suttas say "arises from craving, conceit and wrong views (*taṇhā, māna, diṭṭhī*)." (Bhikkhu Bodhi, Note 881, *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha*, Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2012, p. 1710) So today I'd like to talk a little about craving and how we can work with it to minimize the tendency to mentally proliferate.

In Pāli the word that we translate as craving is *taṇhā*, which suggests the quality of being thirsty, so that it is more than a thought such as "oh I want that." It is a felt experience of really wanting, or perhaps of needing, of being thirsty for ... something. There is a sense of urgency about having to have it.

Craving is the essence of the Second Noble Truth, the cause or origination of *dukkha* (our experience of unsatisfactoriness, of stress, struggle and suffering.) So it is a very fundamental part of the human experience. There are three forms of craving all of which lead to *dukkha*: craving for sensual pleasures; craving for being; and craving for non-being (Bhikkhu Bodhi's "Introduction," *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995, p. 29.)

Craving for sensual pleasures refers to the desire, the thirst that arises when there is contact with a sense object at any of the sense doors, but especially at the five physical sense doors. So when there is a sight that impacts the eye and its associated neural mechanisms, along with consciousness —the knowing that this is occurring— then there is the experience of seeing. Sometimes we see things and there is no desire, no craving associated with the sight. But sometimes we see a pleasurable sight and we want to see more of it. This is craving. And the same process occurs at the other sense doors as well: ear, nose, tongue, body & mind.

Craving for sense pleasures is one of those basic processes of our lives, isn't it, and something that this consumer culture constantly tries to both stimulate and promise that it will satisfy. But of course the satisfaction doesn't last. And so we keep searching for more, and more, and more.

The second form of craving is translated in several ways: as craving for being or craving for existence or craving for becoming. It is based in the basic biological drive to exist, to survive, to not die. So this particular form of craving is very deep rooted. This form of craving is also a psychological process, and this is the form of craving for existence that we are most likely to recognize and work with in our practices. This craving is the desire to be a self in relation to objects in the world, including in relation to other people.

One form of this is the tendency to relate to things as "I am the person who..." is doing this or that. So we are kind of driven to be *doing* this or that because it supports our sense of *being someone*. "I am the person who meditates." "I am the person who loves to eat pizza." "I am the person who owns a Prius."

Another form this takes is the desire that we all have to be acknowledged, to be affirmed, to feel appreciated. This also makes us feel that we exist in a psychological sense. And so if for some reason we start feeling that our psychological existence is threatened, we may look to someone else to fill that need, to say "yes you really are someone." "Yes you really are valuable." This is pretty basic stuff too, isn't it.

From a psychological perspective this sense of being, of existing is at the core of our health, of our self-esteem. But if we look at it from the perspective of "what causes *dukkha*" (the sense that things are unreliable or unsatisfactory, stressful, the experience of suffering) we can see that this craving leads to lots and lots of *dukkha*, agitation, worry and grief.

And then there is the craving for non-existence. At its most extreme form it is the desire to end our lives. But in less intense ways, it is the desire to not be present for what is occurring in our lives now. So from my perspective, aversion can be an expression of this craving for non-existence.

It can be kind of dangerous to look at, to look for these tendencies in our own minds and hearts, because when we find them there is often a tendency to react to them as though "this shouldn't be here." A tendency to want to destroy these cravings. But of course this is just another form of craving, isn't it? Craving to not have craving in one's life!

The more skillful response is to view what has been encountered -- this craving -- with mindfulness and a clear understanding of what it is and that it too is impermanent and conditioned. It is more skillful to recognize it is "not personal" but rather as "one of those things that is so much a part of human existence and arises when conditions are ripe for it to do so." It is more skillful to have a quality of spacious awareness and compassion about it. And one of the practices that uses these skillful approaches to help us avoid getting entangled with craving when it does begin to arise is "guarding the sense doors."

The Buddha said

"Bhikkhus, you should train thus: 'We will guard the doors of our sense faculties. On seeing a form with the eye, we will not grasp at its signs and features. Since, if we left the eye faculty unguarded, evil unwholesome states of covetousness and grief might invade us, we will practise the way of its restraint, we will guard the eye faculty, we will undertake the restraint of the eye faculty. On hearing a sound with the ear.... On smelling an odour with the nose... On tasting a flavour with the tongue... On touching a tangible with the body... On cognizing a mind-object with the mind...'"

(MN39.8, trans. Bhikkhus Ñāṇamoli & Bodhi, p. 364, {PTS i273})

So the Buddha isn't telling us "Don't look." or "Don't smell." and so forth. (Although there are times when not looking is the most skillful response.) He is telling us to not take delight in the characteristics that we perceive when we encounter something in each moment. He is telling us to not take delight in what we perceive whether it is an experience at one of the five physical sense doors, or if it is a tendency to want to identify arising at the mind door. Because when we do take delight, when we do see it as worth grasping, that leads to covetousness or greed, or to grief or aversion for that object, that experience.

Paying attention, bringing wise, careful attention to our experience is our practice. And when, during a moment, we are able to see and relate without taking delight and with mindfulness and clear understanding, then we are also able to experience for ourselves the truth of the cessation of *dukkha*, the truth of the Third Noble Truth.