

Craving & Dukkha

A talk offered by Philip Jones to the Silent Mind-Open Heart Sangha on 01/27/2015.

I've been reflecting on the questions about craving that came up during last week's discussion and I thought I'd try to explore it a bit further this evening. I had this in the back of my mind while I encountered some challenging situations.

Saturday morning I was preparing to leave for a meeting and my wife was busy trying to get the kitchen cleaned a bit and back in some order after weeks of remodeling dirt and disorder. Then I received a phone call saying the space for the meeting wasn't available and could they meet at our house. We ended up doing that, though it required some quick adjustments.

Saturday afternoon we learned that our grandson was being born, five weeks early. My daughter commented, "We weren't planning on this happening." It changed the plans for a baby shower her friends were hosting. And my daughter and son-in-law didn't have things organized for going to the hospital and hadn't even agreed on a name yet.

And then on a less personal note, yesterday I read the African-American New York Times columnist Charles Blow's column about his son, a student at Yale University, being detained at gunpoint by a university policeman. This, of course, in the context of the news from Ferguson, Cleveland, Los Angeles & New York, among other places, of police using deadly force with young African-American men.

All of these experiences reminded me that often in life we don't have control over what happens to us but we may have some control, or input anyway, in how we respond. That response then helps to shape whether we suffer, or at least how much we suffer.

A large part of our practice has to do with finding how we can respond in ways that don't amplify the pain that comes with living a human life, and maybe even reduce it some.

One of the ways the Buddha talked about the tendencies to amplify the pain of human life is as defilements. The Burmese master, Sayadaw U Pandita, has said

"So just as there are three kinds of defilements, there are three respective methods by which one cures them: transgressive defilements are treated with moral restraint (*sīla*); obsessive defilements are calmed by concentration (*samādhi*); and latent defilements are cured by wisdom (*paññā*)."¹

We restrain our unwholesome behaviors through committing to living ethically and practicing renunciation for unwholesome behaviors. We calm the obsessions and proliferations of the mind. And we develop wisdom to see and to see through the deeply conditioned patterns of unwholesome thought that lead to obsessive thinking or proliferations of thought and to unwholesome actions.

The Buddha points to this process in the first two verses of the Dhammapada:

If one speaks or acts
with an afflicted mind,
then suffering follows
like the cart follows
the horse.

If one speaks or acts
with a clear mind,
then happiness follows
like a constant shadow.²

Another way that the Buddha talked about these latent defilements is with the term Ignorance. An analogy that is sometimes used is that of a bush that is unwelcome in one's yard, garden or field. We can cut back the leaves and branches of the bush, which is like cutting back unwholesome behaviors and thoughts. But as long as the root remains, the bush will grow back. The unwholesome thoughts and behaviors will arise again, and again.

So we have to pull the root out as well. The root of unwholesome behaviors and thoughts is Ignorance.

In the most common presentation of the Four Noble Truths, the second noble truth - the cause of dukkha (unsatisfactoriness or stress or suffering)- is described as *taṇha*, translated as craving, thirst or hunger. But a more detailed description of the origin of dukkha is found in the steps of *paticca samupāda*, translated as dependent origination.

In the dependent origination of dukkha, we find that Ignorance conditions *vedanā* or feeling. Because of Ignorance, we don't perceive the feeling accurately. So the beginning of an impulse to grasp, push away or identify with the object of contact arises. This impulse is craving.

As Donna mentioned last week, three forms of craving are described in the suttas: craving for sense pleasures, craving for being, becoming or existence, and craving for non-being, non-becoming or non-existence.

Craving for sense pleasures is pretty easy to understand, I think. We have contact with, we experience, something that has a pleasant feeling-tone associated with it, and we crave or want more. We experience something that has an unpleasant feeling-tone associated with it, and we crave or want less. We experience something that has a neither-painful- nor-pleasant feeling-tone associated with it, and we tend to not notice it, or to wish for something more stimulating.

Craving for being or existence, is when we form an "I, me or mine" around the object of contact. This is who "I" am, or what "I" am. Or, this is "mine."

Craving for non-being or non-existence, is when we form a "not-I, not-me, or not-mine" around the object of contact. "I" am *not* that. *That* is not what I am. That is not "mine". The most extreme form of craving for non-being, of course, is simply the desire to not exist, the suicidal wish. But most of the time craving for non-being is expressed in less extreme forms.

When Ignorance is present, we don't see the craving clearly and so we grasp it, push it away or identify with it. And this strengthens the energy of the craving impulse so that it is stronger and becomes *Clinging*. With Clinging the energy to act on the initial impulse becomes more of an intention. "I'm going to get that." "I'm going to avoid that." "That makes me a good person, a better person, and so forth."

Clinging leads, inevitably, to Becoming or Being, or to Non-Becoming or Non-Being. This is the moment, or longer, when we get what we want. We get what we think is going to make us happier. "Ah, now I've got the brass ring!" or "Whew, I avoided that unpleasantness, now I'll be ok." or "Now that I'm a [grown-up, in love, married, divorced, a parent, a college graduate, have a job, and so forth], now that I think I'm something or

someone, I will be happy." Of course too soon we find that getting what we wanted didn't make us as happy as we thought it would.

There's a quality of unsatisfactoriness, if not outright suffering, involved with having or being something. So Ignorance leads through Craving, through wanting things to be other than the way that they are, to Suffering, to *dukkha*.

We meditate to calm the obsessions of the mind. And then building on that calmness, we meditate to directly see things as they are in our own experience. And we meditate to develop more of a capability to see things as they are. This seeing things as they are is, at a deep level, wisdom. When wisdom is present, Ignorance is not present. And we don't stir up more trouble for ourselves and others from the inevitable pains of living this human life.

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NOTES

1. Sayadaw U Pandita, *Insight Journal*, Barre, MA: Barre Center for Buddhist Studies, Fall 2003, p. 6.
2. Dhammapada 1-2, Andrew Olendzki, trans., Tricycle, Spring 2012, p. 84.