Three Kinds of Craving

Will Kabat-Zinn · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2010) · 56:31

It's a little different sitting up here this week than it was last week. Having met many of you and heard a little about your practice and gotten a sense of some of you as people, it's different. It's nice. I'm sure it's different for you too. I kind of dropped in on you last week—surprise arrival. Who's that guy sitting up there?

So tonight I'd like to talk a little bit about craving. Good old craving. It's worth talking about. It's said by the Buddha to be the cause of suffering—*taṇhā* in the Pali, craving. The Buddha talked about there being three types of craving: craving for sense experience, craving for becoming, and craving for unbecoming. I'm going to go into what those are about.

But first I'd like to reflect a little on why we crave, what the root of this craving is. This craving for experience, for sense experience, a craving to be something or other, to be this or that, or to not be something that we feel that we are. According to the Buddha, the root of this craving, the cause of this craving, is ignorance—is not seeing things the way they are. When we see things clearly with wisdom, with insight, this craving ceases.

So we're looking for fulfillment, looking for happiness, looking for well-being much of the time in objects and experiences. And you can just reflect a little on the process of meditation. Is there any craving for experience? I think in our culture, more than others perhaps, we tend to be experience junkies. We love compelling experiences. It's not that we can't have wonderful experiences, but we seem to think that there's going to be some lasting satisfaction that comes from this or that experience.

Often that's because we do experience wonderful things. Sometimes you're out in nature and you feel some kind of letting down of something that was held. You sometimes feel expansive. You get to the top of a mountain. There's an incredible view, and you feel really different. Or you've been struggling in meditation, you go into the dining hall, there's some delicious food, and you're eating it. You feel yourself relax. There's a sense of ease.

The mistake we often make is that we believe it's the experience which is the fundamental cause of that sense of openness. For example, at the top of the mountain, we think, "Oh, I need the top of the mountain in order to feel that way." There are a lot of causes and conditions that came together to contribute to this experience of openness, this feeling like yourself, this feeling easeful. But one thing that the Buddha was pointing to is that that openness, that ease, is available to you. It's, in a sense, what you are. And certain conditions contribute to you tasting that in various ways, tasting some aspect of that.

The problem with those mountaintop experiences—and they're wonderful in and of themselves, they're fine—is that when we're not on the mountaintop, we tend to think and feel a lack. And to plan our next trip to the mountaintop, and to spend a lot of time planning it. It's because we think that openness is located in the experience of the mountaintop that this whole dis-ease of not being there is created.

In the old Zen stories, there are a lot of accounts of people getting enlightened while they're eating. I always thought that was interesting. And I think part of the reason that might be the case is because when we're eating, usually there's some kind of letting down, especially if we've been working hard, practicing. And then, oh, there's some comforting food. And all of a sudden we just kind of relax a bit. We're not trying to get anywhere. There's the spoon. There's the food on it. Just a kind of moment of ease.

But that doesn't mean that if you just plan to eat eight meals a day, you're going to get enlightened faster. You could take it as eating being the cause. But it's actually that letting go of the search.

When you're at the top of the mountain, there's nowhere else to go. You've arrived. You're there. You're here. And there isn't that movement of desire for anything. It feels amazing.

It's hard to say anything after that. I should just ring the bell and leave.

I think somebody mentioned this earlier in the retreat—I can't remember if it was Joseph, in one of the question periods—quoting that beautiful beginning of the Third Zen Patriarch's poem, "Faith in Mind." He says: "The great way is not difficult for those who have no preferences. When liking and disliking are both absent, the way becomes clear and undisguised. Make the slightest distinction, however, and heaven and earth are set infinitely apart."

It's pointing to this incredible power of wanting and not wanting, liking and not liking. And in those moments when that wanting and not wanting is absent, the way is clear and undisguised.

In meditation, we can get really bent out of shape looking for experiences—experiences that we've had before, or experiences that we would like to have, or experiences that we think we should have. We think that whatever freedom we're looking for (and you're obviously all here for some reason) is going to be found in an experience. It's a very deeply conditioned belief that we seem to carry. Universal, I think—that it's going to be found in an experience.

And what we discover, one of the things we discover as we sit, is that these experiences are coming and going. They don't last. Even the really nice ones. But often we're holding out for that one experience. And even if we're holding out in a little way, in a subtle way, just in that moment, heaven and earth are set infinitely apart. And when heaven and earth are infinitely apart, it's a long way to heaven. You might need a rocket ship. How do you get there? Far away.

We find that the objects we would like—job, relationship, material possessions, money—we think these are going to bring lasting happiness. And we spend a lot of energy pursuing them. It's not that those things

are bad. They can be wonderful. It's not that you shouldn't work for them either. But if you believe that that's where peace lies, the rat race never ends. And who said that thing about the rat race? "The problem with the rat race is that even if you win, you're still a rat." I can't remember who. Somebody.

So there's craving for sense objects and experience, and there's the craving for becoming—thinking that we need to be something that we're not. Some identity. If we only had some new identity. A better version of me. New and improved. Then... Will 2.0.

A lot of the spiritual path can be motivated by that. There can be this belief that when I have more realization, I won't really be me anymore. I'll be this new thing, new personality. Everybody will like me.

We love these kinds of stories, especially in America. We love these feel-good success stories, and sometimes

Our meditation can become like that. It's like one of those cheesy movies where we're the hero and we're going to arrive at some glorious new identity. Fixed.

The mirror image of this—it's almost like talking about the same thing, I realize both sides are in this—is this desire for unbecoming. They're so close together as to almost be the same: the desire to not be certain things that we are, certain things that we think we are.

The underlying delusion is that we believe we can be defined by objects, traits, mental or physical. We fix our identity. We look for our identity in momentary phenomena of mind and body. Because we're identified with this phenomena that's arising right here, this stuff in here—when I think this is me—of course, then I have to improve it to get the better version, or get rid of it to also get the better version.

But I'm going to posit something, and maybe you've glimpsed this or are glimpsing this: who and what we are cannot be defined by any thing, anything that can be perceived, any object of experience, including body, feelings, mind in terms of thoughts. But because we do feel that we are sort of fixed in this identity, whatever it is in the moment, there's a desire to change it.

A simple example: you may be sitting here sensing the body, body breathing, a sense of being aware of that. Feelings arising in the body, sensations coming and going, changing. Aware of that, maybe not too identified with it. You just see, "Oh, it's just phenomena." Empty phenomena rolling on, as Joseph says. Maybe an emotion arises. There's the knowing of it moving through. No problem. Fear, sadness. Maybe thoughts are arising in the mind. You can see them arise, live out their life, and pass away. Not too identified. You just see, "Oh, it's just arisings."

Then something arises. Maybe it's a thought, a belief. And it's different. "I can't do this. I'm worthless. I'm no good." And that feels different. That feels like, "No, that's me." And then there's the desire, obviously, to not be that person. The craving for non-being.

The only reason that craving is there is because we've believed that thought. We think, "Oh, this is me. I

am the worthless person." We've taken birth in that identity. "I'm the no-good meditator," whatever it is. Some of you in the interviews have talked about very repetitive patterns of thought or memories that replay themselves over and over again, and that feel really identified with. "This is me. I am this kind of person. I did this." Sometimes they're just self-judging thoughts, just repetitive.

So what's the way out? It definitely leads to a feeling of craving for unbecoming. "How do I not be this person?" But the way to not be that person is to see clearly how the belief that you are this person is arising. Because it's based in delusion, the work is not to become someone else. It's to see clearly, to see through it. And sometimes it takes a lot of repetitive seeing.

One analogy I like to use—I find it useful, I use it a lot, maybe because I find it useful—is the first time you go to a movie, say it's a thriller, a scary movie, you're on edge. You're really wrapped up in the plot. There's that wind blowing and the creaky door. You don't know what's behind it. Your whole body tenses up, you're totally unaware of what's happening in your body, but it's tensing up.

And you can sense that you know the guy's behind the door. What's going to happen next? And the whole movie is spent completely—I mean, it's like you're there, you're going through all these incredibly strong emotions. The movie's over and you crawl out of the theater. I've crawled out of a few movies—not literally.

But if you went to that same movie and you sat and watched it five times, and you really forced yourself to watch it, it would be a little different the fifth time than the first time. It would probably be a lot different. It might still be scary. But say you went to that movie fifty times, or a hundred times—can you get a feel for it? It would just be boring. Whatever that emotional connection is to the plot, it just wouldn't be there anymore. The guy behind the creaky door—you've been through it too many times.

And it would be hard to keep paying attention. You'd start looking around the theater to see if something else interesting was happening. Maybe you'd start noticing the people in the theater. One person looks interesting. The movie's still playing. You might throw popcorn at someone, try to make something happen. And then at a certain point, you might just get up and leave. "I think I've seen this one a few too many times. There's just nothing left in it."

This is just a metaphor, but eventually you walk by the theater, you see the sign: "I'm a Useless, Terrible Person" is playing. And you think, "You know what? I saw that one. About five hundred times. I think I'll go to the beach."

So partly this is just encouragement to keep watching the movie. Because if you're not really watching it, if you don't really stay there with it, it feels like it's a new movie every time. If you're not really watching it, if you're just kind of *in* it, it doesn't lose that charge. You don't have to be perfectly watching it—don't worry about that—but you have to be more or less present, feeling the feelings that come.

We identify deeply with certain patterns, certain movies that are very compelling for us. Others we can

enjoy, or we're just not that interested in.

There was a time in my practice when I was practicing with Sayadaw U Pandita while he was here at the Forest Refuge. During a certain period, I had this incredible energetic knot in my chest—I'd had this before in my practice. This thing was so painful. It was like a rock or something. And I didn't know what it was about, but it really felt like *me*.

Somehow subtly, all of this belief got wrapped up in this knot—that it was a symbol of my blockage, that I wouldn't be able to progress in the practice because of this obstruction, that it was some kind of karmic hindrance I had to overcome. It got really elaborate, without me being super mindful of that. It was just amazing the kind of reality that got created, that I lived in for a period of time. It was simply the way things were to me. I thought I had to clear it somehow. I didn't know how to.

When you're interviewing with Sayadaw U Pandita, at least the way it worked then, you'd often be waiting outside the room where he was interviewing somebody else. You could hear the interview of the person before you, which was sometimes really not that helpful—though sometimes it actually was very helpful.

Towards the latter part of the retreat, right near the end actually, somehow things got switched up, and I was behind somebody I'd never met before. This person was having all kinds of experiences that were very interesting to me, which I thought were very advanced. And Sayadaw's response was unexpected.

He said to this person, "It sounds like the knowing is getting stronger." I'd never heard him use that term. It was through translation, and it could have been my hallucination, but that's what I heard. I don't even remember what happened in my own interview.

But I went back to my room, and I just stayed with the knowing of this knot. The knot was there, moving, changing. And the knowing just got really, really bright and vivid and obvious. That brightness was not diminishing. All of the same stuff was happening, and it didn't matter at all. The knot was still there, but the mind was totally unaffected by any of it. There was just no sense of identification with this.

It was a very revealing moment—a series of moments—for me. I'd seen this in other ways, but it was such a vivid reminder that it really doesn't matter what is happening. It doesn't matter what you're paying attention to. It doesn't matter the state of your body. It doesn't even matter what's happening in your mind. This knowing—it's here. It's not something constructed. It's right here.

Is there anybody for whom knowing is not happening? Who is not having experience of this moment? No. It's fully operating all the time. But we get so attuned to the objects and identified with them that we think that's where the rub is. Something's supposed to happen. The objects are supposed to change, or my body is supposed to be different, or my mind is supposed to be different. There are supposed to be different thoughts happening in here. Someone needs to change the channel or change the program.

I think it takes a long time for us to understand that we don't have to change the program. Liberation can

be here and now, just in not identifying with this. And we're practicing this in moments—just with the breathing, with the rising of sensation.

Another example of this kind of unbecoming, which is perhaps simpler but was compelling for me: one of my little unbecoming cravings used to be that I would often feel socially awkward. Just this feeling of awkwardness, which I really didn't like. And it really felt like me—awkward. What do I say? I really thought I had to overcome this, to not be awkward, and then things would just be a lot better.

It was interesting over time to see how, in particular moments, this became very obvious. I was practicing at the time when I was in the middle of a social situation, and one of these moments would happen, and it just didn't matter at all. A really awkward moment. And here we are.

The irony is that the awkwardness kind of disappears because you're not afraid of it. If you can be really okay being how you are, it changes something.

Sometimes we think that the direction of practice is to become less who we are. But what I've found is that actually we kind of become more who we are, who we already are—maybe a little less fearful, a little less neurotic. But who we are doesn't disappear. It actually becomes more comfortable being things as they are.

Sometimes I turn to nature because nature is such a good example of things as they are. We don't tend to impose on nature what we impose on ourselves. We might look at a pine tree that's crooked and gnarled and has a very unusual shape to it and think it's very beautiful. We don't wish that it was a straight, tall pine tree.

It's just sort of—this is nature. We kind of get it. There are these wonderful patterns that are all different.

But with ourselves, we don't do that. We don't see nature. We don't see the exquisiteness of things as they are. We don't let ourselves.

And a lot of that is fueled by craving—craving for new objects and experiences, craving for becoming, craving for unbecoming. There's not much room in that for things as they are.

So how do we come to rest in things as they are? How does our craving get worn down? Partly it's through this clear seeing, which you're all cultivating. Seeing that nothing can be clung to. Nothing is substantial or lasts long enough to provide a lasting ground—no thing.

We slowly stop trying to cling. We stop believing in it as much. Because our ordinary condition is that we kind of believe in clinging. That's why we do it. We believe that it's going to work. We believe in becoming. We think that that's going to work. We believe in unbecoming, and we think that that's going to work. So we invest in it.

But as we see clearly, we recognize the suffering, the pain of that investment. This is dharma pain,

dukkha, and it's liberating. It's what Ajahn Chah called the suffering that leads to the end of suffering. It's the pain of grasping, which leads to clinging. It hurts, doesn't it? Even just in the moment. You're meditating, you're fine, and then there's—*what about that?* And this dukkha arises. Things become unsatisfactory.

When I was in college, I was a freshman, just got there. At the school I went to, for some reason—I think this was an old tradition—you had to take a swim test to graduate. You had to pass it. You had to swim the length of a pool. I just have no idea why.

But the way they did it was they'd line up all the freshmen and have them take the swim test at the beginning, so that if they couldn't pass, they could take swimming as a gym class in order to graduate.

And it was a little weird with all these people. You're in a bathing suit, lined up at the pool in this long line. You jump in at the deep end, swim to the other side, swim back. Then you get checked off the list, and you can go to school.

I was standing in line, back a ways, and I noticed there was this guy up ahead who just looked really nervous. You just sort of spot that energetically. This guy was really nervous. He was pacing and fidgeting. And I was like, what's going on with this guy?

I kind of had this feeling something was about to happen. I didn't know what. But I really wanted to find out.

And I watched him. It was his turn. He went up to the edge of the pool. And as he stood at the edge, I just kind of got it—he does not know how to swim.

I could see it plainly. He jumped into the water, the deep end, and just started trying to grab the water, flailing. He was trying to hold on. I didn't even know a human being could sink that fast. He just went down. They had to haul him out.

For me, this is a great analogy for practice. We cannot grasp the ungraspable. And when we try, we go down.

Swimming is not something we know how to do intuitively. We might be able to figure it out pretty quickly, but it takes some getting used to the water. There are different rules in the water than there are on land. Holding on doesn't work—it's not the nature of water. You can't hold on to it. But if you relax and don't try to hold on, you can have a wonderful time in the water. You have to learn how to be in this new way.

Water can be wonderful. You can play around, splash, swim, dive. And this phenomenal world is similar. We can have a wonderful time here. It's not that we shouldn't enjoy our life. It's not that we shouldn't enjoy sense contact or relationship or activities or being alive, engaging. It's wonderful. It's just the grasping and the clinging, the craving that leads to that clinging, which interrupts the freedom and ease of

living free in this realm. Free to enjoy, free to play.

And sometimes—this is subtle too—people hear the teachings about craving being the cause of suffering and they think they're not supposed to want things. So there's this subtle kind of pushing down of wanting. And there can be a subtle disengaging with life. "I'm not supposed to have a preference." What would you like for dinner? "I don't care." Did you like the movie? "I don't know." Which movie do you want to see? "I don't have a preference." That could get old fast. What do you want to do? "It doesn't matter."

Sometimes there can be this defensive posture around wanting, because we want to prevent ourselves from suffering. We think, "I'll just stop the wanting, then I won't suffer." But actually practice is the opposite direction, in my opinion. The instruction is always the same: Can you be with what's arising? When wanting is arising, be with wanting.

If I want to take a walk and I do, is that suffering? If I want to have kale instead of Brussels sprouts, is that suffering? What if I like Brussels sprouts? Is that a problem? No, this is life energy. This is a very different energy than the craving I was describing earlier. I don't know if you can feel that, but it's different. That craving has a desperation in it.

It's a search for security. It's different. And sometimes I can only just act it out even—it has this kind of quality... It feels a little bit more like addiction. You know, people who have addiction, when you have an addiction to something, you're not enjoying it that much. You're not enjoying it much at all, generally, because you're a prisoner of some energy of craving.

So it's different.

It's vulnerable to want things. And the practice is opening to that vulnerability—to really want. When you can really be with wanting and really be with disappointment, it opens up a lot. You don't have to be afraid anymore. The reason you're afraid of wanting is because you're afraid of being disappointed, of not getting it. But if you can be with the not getting it, then you're free to engage.

So in that sense, I think this just opens up a lot of possibilities.

The instructions are simple, and you've heard them a million times. And somehow it never hurts to hear them again, because it's hard for us to remember.

Just this. Just this. Just this.

Just being with what's arising right now. Knowing it. It all unfolds from there. All the great dramas that happen in practice are overcome through this—not through anything else. As much as it may seem that there really is something to unbecome, and there really is something to become.

Let's just sit for a few moments.

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