Enlightenment or Bust (Retreat at Spirit Rock)

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Joseph Goldstein · 57:48

There's a book by the author René Daumal called *Mount Analogue*. It's an allegorical description of a spiritual journey using the metaphor of climbing a mountain, and he offers some very good advice about how to undertake this journey. He said: Keep your eye fixed on the way to the top, but don't forget to look right in front of you. The last step depends upon the first. Don't think you're there just because you see the summit. Watch your footing. Be sure of the next step, but don't let that distract you from the highest goal. The first step depends upon the last.

I love that last little piece. The last step depends upon the first—we have to take the first steps. But the first step also depends on the last. And so even though we're at or toward the beginning of the retreat, this evening I'd like to talk a bit about the end of the path, because the direction of our journey, the direction of our first steps, depends on our understanding of what the last step is. It's helpful to have that comprehensive view of the direction we're going in.

The French philosopher, political activist, and mystic Simone Weil wrote: "What people are looking for is not wrong, but they are looking for it in the wrong place." That's us. Although we may call it by many different names—we might call it love or peace or enlightenment or awakening—in some fundamental way, what we're all looking for is a genuine happiness, a lasting kind of happiness, a sense of completion, a sense of fulfillment. This is precisely what the Buddha's teachings are about. They're about finding or realizing or awakening to this potential that's within us.

The problem is, as Simone Weil says, most of us are looking for it in the wrong place. It's just this misdirected craving for happiness, our misdirected desire for happiness, that keeps the whole wheel of samsara turning. Samsara is the Buddhist term for the endless cycle of conditioned existence. Our misdirected desire for happiness keeps us bound to this wheel, endlessly turning.

The Buddha spoke to this very directly. Often he would be talking to the order of monastics, referring to them as bhikkhus. But bhikkhus in a more general sense also means everyone on the path. Everybody walking on the path could be referred to as a bhikkhu. So when you hear the Buddha give his teachings and he says "bhikkhus," he's talking to you. Listen with that ear.

"Bhikkhus, I do not envision even one other fetter, fettered by which beings go wandering and transmigrating for a long, long time, like the fetter of craving."

That's very explicit. He really nails what this quality of mind is that keeps us transmigrating—even within this one lifetime—through all the ups and downs of our lives.

So what is craving? Although we're familiar with that word, it's not esoteric, it's probably not one that we use all that often in our daily lives. Yet the Buddha is really highlighting this particular quality of mind. It's worth exploring and trying to understand its meaning and nuances. What is craving, and how do we experience it in our lives?

Craving or desire is the translation of the Pali word *tanha*. Tanha means thirst, or sometimes it's translated as the fever of unsatisfied longing. I really like these translations of thirst and fever even more than craving, because those words can give us a visceral sense of what the mind quality is like. Just think of when you were really thirsty and how compelling that is, what a strong primal feeling it is. That's the meaning of tanha, which is often translated as craving or desire.

In English, we often use the words desire and craving interchangeably, but this can be confusing because desire in English has a wide range of meanings. We use it in many different ways. Sometimes desire does mean the thirst or fever of longing associated with greed and grasping and clinging—sometimes that's exactly what desire means. But sometimes desire simply means the motivation to do something.

You know, I have the desire for awakening, or I have a desire to serve, to be of help. That's the use of the word desire in a very different way.

So when we hear the Buddha talk about the end of desire and the end of craving, we really need to understand that he's referring to a very specific kind of desire. There are many other kinds of desires that can be quite wholesome, and we don't want to confuse these two. For tonight's talk, I will be using the terms desire and craving interchangeably, but keep in mind that in other contexts the word desire can mean many other things. We don't want to get confused by this linguistic usage.

The Buddha pointed out with his usual incisive clarity some particular fields of craving that misdirect us from the happiness and peace that we aspire to. Tonight I'd like to explore two of these areas of craving. The first is the craving for sense pleasures, and the second is what the Buddha called craving for becoming.

The craving and desire for sense pleasures is the most obvious. This is not hard to see; it's the one we are most familiar with. These are all the pleasant sights and sounds and scents and tastes and sensations in the body—all these pleasant, agreeable sense objects that we desire, that we want, that we crave. They're desirable and agreeable to us. We could also include all the pleasant states of mind. This craving or desire for sense pleasures is simply our usual engagement with the world.

As we're living our lives, we enjoy and want pleasant experiences, and as much as possible, we'd like to avoid unpleasant experiences. It just seems so natural, completely natural, that of course we want pleasant things and want to avoid unpleasant things. And it is natural and normal.

But here, right here, is where the Buddha begins a very interesting analysis of this situation. He did not condemn sense pleasures as being sinful—that's not at all part of the Buddhist framework. Rather, in his

analytic, and we might even say scientific, introspective approach, he began to ask some very pointed questions about his life experience.

The first question he asked of himself was: What is the gratification in the world? That's a fundamental question—what gratifies us in the world, in our experience? As a young prince, as it's told, he enjoyed the whole range of sense pleasures. He led a very privileged life in that sense and was fully immersed in the enjoyment of these pleasures, so they were not at all foreign to him.

And then, as it's related in the discourses, the thought came to him: Whatever pleasure and joy there is in the world, this is the gratification in the world. That makes sense. Whatever pleasure and joy there is in the world, that's the gratification we get from it. If there was no pleasure and joy in the world, beings would not become enamored of it. We become enamored of the world, of sense pleasures, precisely because they do bring us a kind of happiness. We need to acknowledge that. That's our common understanding of our lives, isn't it? Different kinds of sense pleasures bring a certain kind of happiness to us, and that's why we keep going after them. It's precisely because there is this gratification. The Buddha isn't saying there's no gratification in sense pleasures; he's saying there is gratification, and that's why we crave them.

But rather than simply listening to the Buddha's words, it's always good to receive them as instructions for our own introspection. It's not about hearing the Buddha say something and then either agreeing or disagreeing—that's not the point at all. The Buddha is pointing to something, and he's inviting us to look at where he's pointing so we can see for ourselves. We can take the very same questions he asked of himself

and ask it of ourselves. What is the gratification that we find in our lives? That would be worth reflecting on. What different experiences in the body, in the mind, are we enamored of? What different kinds of experiences do we desire and want?

That would be an interesting internal survey—just to get a very clear picture. Instead of simply muddling through life, going after this and going after that, we could really get a clear picture. Yes, this is where I find gratification. These are the delights that I become enamored of. In this way, we personalize these teachings.

Our cravings and gratifications seem to come in a very wide range of intensities and frequencies. On one end of the craving spectrum might be the obsessive desires that consume our lives. There might be addictive desires for food, for sex, for alcohol, for drugs, for success, for power, for fame, for wealth, for possessions, for comfort. Even for some people there's an obsessive desire for love. The mind can create this craving and fall into this craving for a wide range of different experiences.

It's interesting that most, or a good part, of the great literature of the world is really about these obsessive cravings that one might say infect human beings. And we're all part of this. We can see this in ourselves to some degree or other. In so many ways, Western culture just feeds this kind of craving. In fact, we could

almost say the whole society revolves around it. One of my favorite examples was a sign in a store window in New York that said, "Don't let desire pass you by." The country would probably collapse if we let desires pass us by! So that's the message we grow up with—feed the desire, as if it's a good thing. It takes a lot of care to begin to unpack this conditioning within ourselves because it is so pervasive.

Or we may have sense desires and cravings and wants not necessarily on this obsessive level that consumes our lives, but still as the driving force behind many of our actions. What drives us to do things in the world? There will be a wide range of motivations, but it would be very interesting to pay attention and see to what extent desire or wanting or craving for sense pleasures is driving our actions—just so we get a clear picture of our lives and the choices we're making.

We can also watch desires, and this is really interesting on retreat. We can watch desires as just quickly passing thoughts in the mind, passing thoughts of wanting. What I've found interesting is to see even these light passing thoughts, to often see how deeply persistent they are. I've had many examples of this being on retreat. I could be sitting and walking, and maybe during walking meditation the thought will come, "Oh, a cup of tea would be nice." I just watch it come and go. Take a few more steps. "Oh, yeah, cup of tea." Take a few more steps, just let it come and go. "Cup of tea." A few more steps. "Cup of tea." And at some point, go get the cup of tea.

It's like a blade of grass pushing up through cement—this very small thing, but with such deep roots. Craving and desire is a primal energy within us. So even though in particular situations the content may seem trivial, the energy behind it is not trivial. We really want to begin to explore this aspect of our lives because it plays such a powerful role.

It's also very helpful to see how seemingly trivial desires, momentary desires, can sometimes strengthen into really strong habits. We go from "I want" to "I need" to "I must have." That becomes the trajectory.

Just as a totally ridiculous example of this powerful tendency: I was on a self-retreat at home, and I was in the habit of enjoying a cup of coffee in the morning for breakfast to get the whole system going. I had all the paraphernalia—the coffee beans, the grinder—making the perfect cup of coffee. One day I go downstairs and the coffee grinder didn't work. The first word that came to my mind: disaster. And in that moment, I felt it to be that.

I mean, given the state of the world, a broken coffee grinder doesn't really rise to the level of disaster—but it felt like that because of the power of the habit, the power of the wanting, the power of craving. I had to laugh at it, finally.

So many of these different patterns of craving and desire are so familiar to us. It's just how we live. It's just what our lives are about. They seem like the very ordinary fabric of life. This is what life is about. And because they're so much a part of who we take ourselves to be—we really, in a way, define ourselves and define our personality by the things we want and the things we desire—very often they're invisible. We're

just not paying attention because they seem so ordinary.

So just as an experiment, a retreat environment while you're here would be a very good opportunity to notice the gratification that comes from even very simple sense pleasures. Just so you attune to the dynamics of anticipated sense pleasure, and then the wanting, the craving, and then the gratification. It goes from being a theoretical description that the Buddha laid out to something we internalize the experience of. We understand it from the inside.

You might notice, just during the day, what things give you moments of delight. Here they're probably limited, but there are enough. What do you become enamored of, even on a slight scale? Maybe it's lunch—all the good food, and you can feel that kind of anticipation. We'll back up a minute. Notice the difference between when you're doing walking meditation back and forth and when you're walking to lunch. You might be walking just as slowly, but energetically, there's something different. We're enamored. We're desiring, craving that pleasant hit.

Or maybe it's the hot shower in the morning. Or a particularly delectable moment is when, after a long day, you just lie down in bed—that first moment, it's delightful. And we do become rather enamored of it.

You can also investigate this conditioning in the enjoyment of pleasant fantasies in the mind. It's not only the physical senses. The same dynamic is at work with pleasant, pleasurable mental experience. It's possible to spend a long time on retreat just immersed and lost in pleasant fantasies. They might be pleasant food fantasies, or maybe really exciting sexual fantasies, or fantasies about your next perfect relationship. Whatever it may be, the mind is very creative, and we can spend a long time just enjoying the pleasure.

So at some point in this investigation, one might resonate with the Buddha's words: "Whatever gratification there is in the world, that I have found." Now, that seems like a very ordinary statement, but it would be really useful to reflect on. Whatever gratification there is in the world, that I have found.

We've all enjoyed an endless number of agreeable things. Do we have that sense that whatever gratification there is in the world, that I have already found? Or are we still holding out for some fantastic new taste, or some unbelievably pleasant touch sensation? Do we still have the hope that there's something else out there that's going to do it for us?

If we can come to some sense—based on our own experience—that whatever gratification there is in the world, that I have found, we might relax a little bit. Instead of that endless quest for the next hit of something, we might recognize that it's not going to be really any different than any of the previous pleasant hits we've already had. But we're seduced. Oh, the next one is going to be the big one.

Now, the Buddha did not stop in his understanding of gratification and what provides it. He then went a bit further in his exploration. "Bhikkhus"—that's you—"I set out seeking the dangers of the world."

So first he's looking at what is the gratification in the world, which is the pleasure of the sense delights. Then he said, well, what is the danger of the world? And "danger" is one translation of the Pali word *ādīna va*. There are other translations which are a little more colloquial, and I like them. So we might think of this as: what are the drawbacks of the world? Or the disadvantages? Or the downside of things?

And he continued: "Whatever dangers or downsides there are in the world, that I have also found." Namely—

that the world is impermanent, and because of that, ultimately unreliable, because nothing lasts, subject to change.

So this is, again, not esoteric understanding. If we're paying attention, we can, I think, relate quite easily to this comprehension of, yes, there are all these pleasures and gratifications, but there is a downside in experience. The downside is that things are impermanent, unreliable, subject to change.

But here's where most of us and the Buddha may take slightly different paths. For us, how many times when things are really good, when things are going well, when they're easeful, when we're enjoying our lives, when things are just rolling along in an easeful way—how often do we have enough interest and foresight and wisdom, right in the midst of those good times, to ask the question, "Well, what's the downside here?" When I look at my own experience, not that often. Mostly I'm immersed in just the pleasure of the enjoyment.

But that's of course what makes the Buddha the Buddha. He didn't just stop there. He said, okay, in the midst of this, acknowledging that there is that kind of sense gratification—so he's not denying that—but in the midst of it, he asks that further question: Well, right in the midst of this experience, is there a downside? Is there a drawback?

There are several ways of understanding what these drawbacks of sense pleasures are. And again, it's worth just reflecting on it in our own lives because we're so easily seduced by the gratification. We don't often look underneath.

One of the downsides, one of the drawbacks, is that in the end, these sense pleasures don't deliver on their promise of happiness. We think they will, and we hope they will, but they don't, precisely because they don't last. We believe that they'll bring us happiness because of the pleasant feelings that come when we have pleasant sense experience. There's a pleasant feeling that we enjoy. And these experiences do bring some kind of happiness, so it's not to deny that. They do bring a kind of happiness for some time. But all of these pleasant feelings that come with beautiful sights and sounds and smells and touch and sensations and thoughts—with all of those pleasant experiences, the pleasant feelings associated with them are very, very transitory. And we know that.

This is what's so amazing to me. When we look back on our lives and look back on all the pleasant things we've experienced—which are countless—when we look back, their ephemeral nature is so apparent. It's

like, where are they now? Where's the pleasure of lunch now? Totally gone.

So what's so amazing to me is we know this when we look back, but when we look ahead, in anticipating the next pleasures, we just forget what we just learned. As if the next one is going to do it in a way that none of the other ones we've experienced have. Our minds are a trip.

And for me, the interest and the power and the delight in the meditation is just this: learning the tools for examining and understanding our own minds and our own hearts and how we get involved in things that just create more suffering—and how it's possible to disentangle from that. That's really what we're doing here. It's this exploration of your own experience.

If we keep going after these momentary sense pleasures, or even ones that last for some little bit of time but eventually end, as they all do—how many people are just living their lives this way? This is their life. It's just always looking forward to the next pleasant hit of something. And then that passes, and then looking for the next hit, and the next hit, and the next. And before we know it, our life's at an end, without ever having come to a sense of fulfillment or a sense of peace or a sense of completion.

So this is not an insignificant pattern. And that's why the Buddha gave such importance to understanding craving. It's the second noble truth. This is the cause of suffering in our lives.

As lay people, we are living in the world of sense objects, sense pleasures, sensory delights. Most of us are not leading renunciate lives. So to one extent or another, we are engaged in this arena. But still, each one of us, everyone here, on some level knows that it's not really the path to happiness. Because if you believed that it was, you'd be on some nice vacation someplace and you wouldn't be here struggling with pain in your knee. So something brought you here. And it's not so easy to arrange to be here.

So for each one of us, there is some very deep wisdom already there, because that's what brought us here together. We all understand on some level that a growing realization of the Dharma really does open up vast potentials for a much deeper kind of happiness.

The first drawback of relying on sense pleasures for happiness is that they don't deliver. Ultimately, it's a very temporary enjoyment. The second danger, the second drawback of sense craving, is when this desire or craving becomes an obsessive force in the mind, which can lead to so many unwholesome actions. Newspapers are filled with stories of people doing all kinds of violent things or harmful things, driven by one kind of craving or another.

One of my very favorite translation stories, which many of you have probably heard: One time I was sitting on a retreat with Sayadaw U Pandita. He would speak in Burmese and then the translator would translate it into English. At one point he was talking about sense desires, and he went on for quite a while—maybe five minutes or ten minutes in Burmese. Then the translator translated that whole long thing into four words: "Lust cracks the brain." Lust cracks the brain. It does. Have you noticed? When that's strong, when that's really strong in the mind—it could be lust for anything—but when that's strong,

we go crazy. People do so many harmful things driven by that energy.

So we need to take care. The force of craving is not only about the little broken coffee grinder and the disaster that was. Sometimes craving really is a powerfully destructive force, and we see it in the world. When we take an interest in how all this is working, it can really lead to a much fuller, more engaged, wholesome, and skillful relationship with the world.

This is the first arena of craving, and I spend so much time on it because it's so powerful in our lives and it's so obvious. This is not an esoteric teaching, but we need to pay attention to it. And again, I just want to reiterate: all of these Dharma talks and everything we do here—it's not a question of listening and you either believe or you don't believe. It's all an invitation to look for yourselves. The Buddha is just pointing us to take a look within ourselves to see: Does this resonate? Is this true? Because that's where the transformative value is. It's not in the intellectual comprehension of it.

The second type of craving is more subtle and often goes unnoticed. It's one which has a direct bearing on our meditation practice, and there are elements of this which have had a profound effect on my own understanding of the meditative process. This is what the Buddha called craving for becoming—the basic urge or desire to become this or that in our continued existence.

One very familiar pattern of this might be the obsessively planning mind. Have you ever been caught up in a mind that just endlessly, obsessively plans, imagining ourselves in some future situation and then thinking about how we get there and what we have to do and all the things involved in that? How often do we get lost in the mind creations of future self? So again, another interesting observation for you as you go through the day: keep just an eye out, or a general sense, of how much time the mind is lost in either past or future. It's a lot. Our minds just get caught up in this desire for becoming and then all the thought and emotion that goes with that. Being lost in these thought fantasies is desire for becoming.

But there is a way. Planning is a useful tool of the mind—this is not to suggest we should never plan. But there is a huge difference between planning while being grounded in the moment, knowing we're doing it, thinking it through and coming to the end of it, really being grounded in the present moment—there's a big difference between that and, as I'm sure you well know, being lost in the thought fantasies that just keep repeating themselves. Pay attention to that and really see it.

One of the most striking experiences of craving for becoming, very easy to observe, is the feeling of rushing.

What does rushing mean? What's that feeling like? We're all familiar with the feeling, but it's when we're ahead of ourselves. It's when the mind is already at its destination before we get there. We're already doing what we're aiming to do, but we're still here. And it's that toppling forward energy.

There's a famous line from James Joyce, from *Dubliners*, his collection of stories: "Mr. Duffy lived a short distance from his body." That's us. A good part of the time we're living a short distance from our bodies.

We're ahead of ourselves. So what is that? That's a kind of craving for becoming. It's like we're not settled back in the moment. It's wanting or craving, and it's creating a very unbalanced energetic system.

This is not insignificant, because this understanding of craving for becoming is intimately connected with the understanding of enlightenment, or freedom, or awakening. There's something right in this point that's very, very powerful. Because very often—in fact, probably most of the time—we forget that liberation or freedom is not about getting. It's not about becoming something. It's not about craving. It's not about holding on.

The very path we are on and what we're practicing—what is the essence of the practice? This is why I started the talk saying it's good to have an eye on the last step, because it informs how we take the first steps. When we understand that liberation is not about getting anything, that it's about letting go, that changes how we're doing our practice.

You're familiar with the experience when you're sitting—and it could be in the walking too, but I've noticed it a lot in my sitting meditation. What I'm going to be talking about now is really quite subtle, but I think obvious enough that you will recognize it. When we're sitting and we're just with our experience—the breath or sensations or whatever it is—and we're just there in a pretty easeful way, have you ever noticed just this very subtle tendency to be leaning into the next moment? It's like we're leaning into the process. We're with this in order for this. We're taking this breath in order for the next thing to arise. So it's that slight forward leaning that is craving for becoming.

A few years ago I was on self-retreat and I had a really vivid and in some way transformative experience of just this process. There's a line in the suttas, in the discourses, that's repeated quite frequently. It's a line that sometimes people will say as an expression of their awakening moment. And sometimes it's a line that when people hear it, they get enlightened: "Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away." Incredibly simple. Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away. Whatever—which is everything. Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away.

So I was sitting on retreat, and I had read that line a million times. Yeah, everything rises and passes—it just seemed like an obvious statement. But this particular time on retreat I was sitting, and for some reason that line came to my mind. But it's as if the line and the meaning of it dropped right into the process, the meditative process. So it was no longer on the intellectual level. It was like: whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away. It was being applied in that very moment to the flow of experience.

And then the conclusion became strikingly obvious right in this meditative process. If whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away, therefore there's nothing to want. Because whatever it is that I might want meditatively—leaving aside all the external things—whatever I might want meditatively will also pass away. Therefore, there's nothing to want.

And in that moment, just—oh. I was seeing it so vividly. There's nothing to want. In that moment, I could

feel the mind drop back from even that slight leaning into the next moment. It was like not wanting. And even though it was just for maybe a few moments, it was enough to actually recognize and taste

the quality or the experience of the mind free of craving. Because I could see the mind go from the lean to not wanting anything. And the experience of the mind not wanting—not the concept of it, but the actual experience of the mind free of wanting—was one of incredible peace and completion. There was nothing more to do for that moment.

And I saw that it really was, you could say, a glimpse of the third noble truth. The first is that there's suffering, or dukkha. The second is the cause, which is craving. The third noble truth is the end of dukkha, which is the end of craving. So we can get a taste of it, which is very real. It's not fabricated. And it may only last for a few moments. But as one Tibetan teacher would often instruct, practice it short moments many times.

So we don't have to necessarily be practicing with this idea, "Oh, maybe someday I'll get to the end of craving, but that's ten lifetimes away." No, we can practice the profundity of the end of craving for a moment, or a few moments, and actually taste it, actually experience what that is like.

This is a tremendous reorientation of our meditation practice. Because in some strange way, even though we may have heard all of these teachings, there's so much wanting that comes into the very meditation practice itself. We're sitting and wanting something.

This was really a significant shift in my understanding, even after all these years of practice. Forty-five years of practice. And this is one of the things that's so remarkable about the Dharma. We're always just at the forward edge of our understanding, wherever we are. We're at our own forward edge. And the Dharma is so vast, it just keeps opening. Very often, there can be these seemingly small insights that have a profound effect on our understanding of the path. Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away. Therefore, there's nothing to want.

So maybe just as an experiment sometimes when you're sitting, just occasionally drop in the phrase: not wanting. Just that—not wanting. And see if there's any kind of release in the mind from that forward lean into the process. And then you'll get a sense of the relief, the ease, the peace.

In the early morning of the Buddha's enlightenment, it's said that at the first appearance of the morning star, when the Buddha realized full awakening, these words came to his mind: "Realized is the unconditioned. Achieved is the end of craving." It couldn't be more explicit. He's just telling us what the nature of the free mind is, what the nature of the mind at peace is. And again, we can touch it, we can taste it, we can experience it even briefly. Short moments many times. And it transforms our understanding—our understanding of our lives and all the choices we make, our understanding of the path and how we're practicing.

I found that these moments of really touching this and understanding this—mind not wanting, not

craving, settling back into that openness—even those short moments can become a pole star, a sense of direction for us, so we really have a clear understanding of where we're going and what we're essentially doing in our practice. Because there are so many instructions and methodologies and things to do, but they're all in the service of not wanting. And we don't want to forget that.

I'll just close with a few lines from the Sufi poet Hafez: "Ever since happiness heard your name, it has been running through the streets trying to find you."

I love that. The Dharma has heard our name, all of our names, and it's running through the streets trying to find us. So let ourselves be found.

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