Destruction of Craving: Tracing Back to the Origin of Dukkha

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Tonight I want to look at the teaching known as the Destruction of Craving, the Mahatanhasankhaya Sutta.

The teaching is given because one of the Buddha's monks, Sati, believes that there is just this one consciousness that runs throughout all our life and was with us in our previous lives and will accompany us throughout our future lives. Just this one and no other, he claims, thinking he's teaching the Dhamma correctly and according to the Buddha. The other disciples try to dissuade him, but Sati insists on his view and is summoned by the Buddha to discuss the matter.

The Buddha starts by asking Sati about his one consciousness understanding. When Sati repeats this, the Buddha then asks him to define consciousness. Sati says it is that which speaks and feels and experiences here and there the results of good and bad actions.

To Sati's dismay, the Buddha dismisses this vehemently, saying, "Misguided man, to whom have you ever heard me explain the Dhamma thus? Misguided man, in many discourses have I not stated consciousness to be dependently arisen, since without a condition there is no origination of consciousness. But you, misguided man, have misrepresented us and by your wrong grasp have injured yourself and stored up much demerit."

We are told that on hearing this, poor old Sati sat silent, dismayed, with shoulders drooping and head down, glum and without response.

I'd say we could all have sympathy with Sati. It certainly seems that our essence, call it consciousness, is that which speaks and feels and experiences, and that this essence has been with us all our life. And if we believe in rebirth, it's hard to see what else within us might survive other than that which speaks and feels and experiences the results of good and bad karma. Obviously, we're badly mistaken here—we're suffering from the same delusion that got Sati into trouble.

It is interesting that the Buddha gets Sati to explain his understanding before he so emphatically refutes it. This reflects the fact that we need to be clear about our delusions before we can see through them. We put them forward into the gaze of mindfulness, trusting that this will filter out the falsehood from the truth.

The Buddha then reiterates his own teaching. Firstly, consciousness is of six kinds. For instance, if our eyes are open and there's a visible object in front of them, then eye consciousness can arise. If our hearing works and sound waves fall on the ears, then ear consciousness can arise. He gives the analogy of fire—a

log fire, a grass fire. We name the fire depending on what fuel it is based upon.

He then goes on to question the audience on three points. To start with, he asks whether they are clear that "this has come to be." They all chorus in unison, "Yes, Venerable Sir." It is very irritating when we're scratching our heads wondering what on earth he means. But these short, often perplexing statements from the Buddha give us something to investigate in vipassana.

It would be worthwhile, when you next sit in meditation, to ask yourself whether your experience could be described by the phrase "this has come to be." Once our mind settles in meditation, we find ourselves in a sea of sensations and feelings, reactions of desire or aversion, emotions, thoughts and images. This can be incredibly confusing until we notice that only one of these is happening at any one time. It simplifies things to track each passing experience rather than try to make sense of the totality. Each experience could be labelled as "this."

We might be watching the breath. We feel glad to be watching the breath. What the Buddha is asking of us is to notice that gladness has come to be. After a while, we don't feel so glad anymore. We feel a bit glum, thinking something better should be happening. Again, what's asked of us is to notice that glumness has come to be, that discontent has come to be. In general, whatever takes our attention, we're being asked to notice that this is our present moment experience.

To follow this to a deeper level, if our gaze lands on a green field, eye consciousness gives us an image of greenness. Concentration is rarely sharp enough to see individual moments of consciousness in this way, and so we see the world as a multitude of separate objects which all exist simultaneously—green fields and trees and sky and so on. But when we calm the mind enough to allow moments of deeper clarity, we see that only one sense contact can be registered at a time, for instance greenness, blueness, greyness, and that we're building an overall picture by joining the dots.

While it's an amazing feat of intelligence to be able to join the dots and negotiate the world based on the overall picture we get from this, we also need to see the underlying process. I had a glimpse of this one time as I was eating lunch on retreat. I saw the knife and fork moving slowly toward the potato. My attention was taken by something else for a moment. Then visual consciousness came to the fore again, only this time the knife and fork had moved closer to the potato. I realized I had just seen two visual stills within what I normally interpret as a continuous video of visual consciousness.

Because of mindfulness, I wasn't joining the dots in the usual way. Instead, I knew that in between the two stills, I had no idea where the knife and fork were, or even whether they existed. There was a complete blank and absence of information. For those moments, visual consciousness had ceased.

The Buddha never suggests that the world stops existing when we're not watching it. He doesn't attempt to describe reality in terms of objective science. What he describes is the cognitive process upon which we build our picture of reality.

He wants us to see that our access to the world, our ability to know it consciously, is unstable, conditional. A portal opens, gives us a little snippet of information, then closes. As the Buddha teaches, consciousness arises and then ceases.

Getting a direct experience of this undermines the delusion Sāti describes so succinctly—that there's just one consciousness that sees and feels and experiences the results of good and bad karma, and that this same consciousness has been with us all our lives and will be with us in the next life too. Sāti's description mirrors our delusion, but it doesn't bear scrutiny under the watchful eye of mindfulness.

Seeing this stop-start nature of cognition is not simply academic. It might rock a person to the core of their being to realize how limited is our knowledge of reality. As we learn to live with this uncomfortable news, the insight gradually opens the heart. It helps us loosen our grip on certainties we cling to—entrenched opinions about who and what we are, how we should behave, how others should behave. Knowing how little we actually know makes it easier to forgive mistakes, to be grateful that anything at all can actually work out right in the midst of such a paucity of real information dependent on so many unproven assumptions. We realize how much we're taking for granted and what a miracle it is even to be able to take a footstep or make a cup of tea.

Having ascertained that his disciples understand experience from the viewpoint of present moment awareness—which can be summarized as "this has come to be"—the Buddha then goes on to ask whether they're clear that its origination occurs with that as nutriment. Conscious experience depends on certain conditions. It doesn't arise from nowhere. It needs support, nutriment. All of these nutriments, he declares, have craving as their origin.

Craving is another word for sensual desire, or *taṇhā* in Pali. This, the Buddha had discovered, was the basic drive underlying all worldly experience. It's because we want something from the world that we become conscious of it. That's quite a thought to reflect on.

Now of course the Buddha was conscious and could see and hear and think. He was living within the world of sense contact. So there's obviously a way to experience the world that doesn't depend on craving. The word *taṇhā* comes in three flavors. The desire for sense pleasure is one. Another is the desire to become—to be someone special. And finally, the desire not to become. This is when we want to annihilate ourselves. In the extreme it means suicide, but in minor ways this desire arises out of embarrassment, for example, when we want to become invisible. *Taṇhā*, or craving, refers to all of these three flavors of desire.

There is a related word, *chanda*, which describes skillful desire. *Chanda* also supports consciousness. We see this when we use *chanda* to develop traits like *mettā*, for example. We start spotting opportunities where goodwill is needed. We become more conscious of goodwill in others. It's like we've opened a door into a whole new aspect of life, an area we were previously not conscious of.

The Buddha doesn't describe the workings of an enlightened being, as we don't need to know this before we get there. But my guess is that *chanda* plays a part in maintaining their consciousness within the phenomenal world. But that's an aside.

What the Buddha is keen for us to understand is that within our unenlightened state, all nutriment for conscious experience has craving as its base. Whatever is our present moment experience, this has come to be because we crave sense pleasure, we crave existence—to become someone special—or we crave non-existence, to be invisible.

The third question the Buddha puts to his disciples is whether they are clear that with the cessation of that nutriment, what has come to be is subject to cessation. Let's say what has come to be is a feeling of happiness. This will have been born from certain conditions—it could have been the thought of a job well done. If we can steady attention on the feeling, the thought will fade, and sometime afterwards the feeling also fades. This shows us that the feeling of happiness needs certain supportive factors.

In fact, everything we experience fades away after a few moments, once the supporting conditions give way. We see this in gross terms. An animal dies without food. A plant dies without water. Snow melts when it gets too warm. Machines break down when they're not maintained. Everything depends on its supporting conditions and fades away, ceases to exist once those conditions fail to appear.

Mostly we hear this as bad news. We dread change and loss. But of course it can be used to suit our purposes. If we want to stop something undesirable, it's usually easier to undermine its supporting conditions than to tackle the problem head on. If a child is crying, we find out what the problem is.

They might be hungry, so we give them something to eat. What we're doing is taking away the cause of their distress, rather than preventing them from crying.

It's the same within us. We might sense anger as a big problem in our lives. Instead of trying to suppress every emotional flare-up, we can look for the causes of anger, work to undermine these. The same applies to any of the hindrances, any unskilful tendencies we find within ourselves. The more we undermine the conditions, the more the unskilfulness loses its grip on us.

This is essentially why the Buddha lists all the factors that support craving. The better we understand these, the more options we find for dismantling the whole structure.

Having set the big picture, the Buddha then goes on to list the chain of factors that support craving. These are the first seven links in the chain known as dependent arising or dependent origination—a twelve-link process that leads from ignorance to dukkha.

The immediate support for craving, its proximate cause, is feeling, vedanā in Pali. We crave to get more pleasant feelings, to get rid of unpleasant ones, to ignore neutral ones.

What underlies feeling, he asks. The answer is sense contact. Feelings are generated only as a result of

some snippet of information that has come through the senses. The feeling tells us whether this is pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. Feeling is a biological adaptation which aids survival. Any organism needs to be able to detect threats, to seek out food or other nourishment, to filter out sensory information that's not relevant to survival. So our biology is set up to filter sense contacts into these categories, giving us a feeling tone for each bit of sense data.

The process happens so quickly, so automatically, we're rarely aware of our feelings. We simply react automatically. However, as the Buddha points out, feeling is the proximate cause for craving. And so we need to learn to tune into the feeling tone of experience.

To recap on these three links: craving is based on feeling. When we experience a pleasant feeling, we crave for more of the same. When we experience an unpleasant feeling, we crave to get rid of it. We crave to ignore neutral feeling. In turn, feeling is only generated when a new bit of sensory information is registered by sense contact.

What underlies sense contact? The six sense doors. One of these is forming the portal, allowing that snippet of information to come in. The sensation of warmth requires the body's tactile system as a door to consciousness. A bird song needs the hearing system. The thought of buttered toast needs the mind as a sense door.

When we acknowledge the crucial role of the sense doors, we also see that one way to reduce craving is to withdraw from as much sensory stimulation as possible. We go somewhere quiet, shut the eyes, make the body comfortable. With a bit of luck, the only challenging feelings we have to deal with are those that enter via the doorway of the mind.

What underlies the six sense doors? Mind and matter. Nāma-rūpa. The sense doors are built from the cells, blood, and neurons in our bodies, animated by mental phenomena such as attention and intention. Nāma-rūpa translates literally as name and form. Form refers to the body, the world of matter—blood, bones, neurons. What gives this a name, a meaning, is nāma, the mind.

As an aside, it's generally understood that dependent arising describes how we experience the world. It's not a description of scientific reality, but of our inner cognitive reality. It's also generally understood that the first six of the links, up as far as sense contact, all occur simultaneously. It's not that we become aware of mind and matter, nāma-rūpa, and then become aware of one of the sense bases and then the snippet of data from the outside world. Instead, we become conscious of all of these in the one moment. The usual way to say this is that they all arise simultaneously. We can't separate them in time, but we can examine our experience at any one time and tease out these various strands within the experience.

Curiously, sense contact and feeling are also part of nāma. A simple mechanical understanding of dependent origination would suggest that since nāma supports contact and feeling, it can't also contain them. But the reality in which we live isn't so simple.

Think of an ecosystem. The top predators—let's say owls—depend on there being mice to prey upon. The mice depend on there being seeds to eat. The seeds depend on there being plants to develop them. The plants depend on the soil.

The soil needs the nutriment from owl and mouse droppings to be fertile. The dependence is intertwined rather than linear. Everything depends on everything else. If the owls disappear, the mouse population would explode, eating all the seeds, resulting in famine and devastation. So the owls, in one sense, support themselves—support the system by feeding off it.

In the same way, contact and feeling support themselves because they are part of nāma, the mental component underlying the sense bases. The sound that I'm hearing forms part of the mind that listens. Although the sound vibrations come from, for example, a bird singing, the sound I hear is internal and subjective. It's a purely mental phenomenon, an aspect of the mind that listens. Looked at from the point of view of experience, sound isn't external. It occurs within the mind, within consciousness. Similarly, the evaluation of the sound as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral is a mental process. It forms part of the mind that listens to the sound and feels it as pleasant.

While this complexity might seem daunting, we can use it to our advantage. For example, it helps to lessen our sense of separation from the world. If sounds are within me, forming part of my basic mentality, why not try to live more peacefully with them? If they sound pleasant to my ears, it evokes gratitude to reflect that the pleasant feeling is forming part of my mental makeup at this moment, helping me to see the world in a more positive way. If it's the grating noise from a jackhammer that I'm hearing, I'll have more compassion for myself when I reflect that the unpleasant feeling is coursing within me, affecting me at my core. If it's the background hum of the fridge I'm hearing, its evaluation in neutral tones forms part of the quietness in my own mental background. Noticing this invites me to take time off from busyness and spend a few moments in refrigerator-humming meditation.

What I'm saying, basically, is that knowing sense contact and feeling are in here—part of our subjective mental world, as opposed to out there—helps to draw attention inwards, steady the mind on these very sensations and the feelings they evoke. The more we can steady the mind, the more we foster positive qualities like mindfulness, compassion, gratitude, and tranquility. At the same time, we're letting go of our usual urges towards reactivity, restlessness, doubt, and other hindrances.

The Buddha then asks what nāma-rūpa depends on, and answers that consciousness is their proximate cause. Consciousness, viññāṇa in Pali, describes awareness at any one point of the six sense doors. A useful analogy is a mental screen. Consciousness is the screen itself, while sense contact, vedanā, and the other components of mind—such as attention and intention—are the images that appear on the screen.

Imagine you're in a cinema. If the screen suddenly disappeared, you wouldn't see the film. The light from the projector would pass on through, disappear into blackness. Similarly, the ears could be ringing with the vibrations from a rock concert, but because we're fast asleep, the sounds disappear into the vast

silence of unconsciousness.

Although in this sutta the Buddha describes consciousness as the condition upon which nāma-rūpa rests, in another sutta the two are described as interdependent. Consciousness depends on nāma-rūpa as much as nāma-rūpa on consciousness. Sāriputta, one of the Buddha's foremost disciples, gives the analogy of two sheaves of wheat resting against one another. If you take out one, the other collapses. Likewise for consciousness and nāma-rūpa. The screen of consciousness is needed to play the film of nāma-rūpa. The film contains mental factors like intention and attention, which are needed to beget the screen. You could call it an eco-friendly screen. It only comes into being when there's a film to play. It decomposes instantly when it's not needed.

The Buddha then asks, what is it that underlies consciousness? The answer is saṅkhārā, habitual formations. As the term suggests, these are the habits we develop as we repeat patterns of thought, speech, and behaviour. A river cuts a channel through rock as it rushes from its source to the open sea. Similarly, as ignorance rushes toward dukkha, our thoughts, speech, and actions cut out a saṅkhāra—a channel through which our mental and physical energies can flow. The more often we repeat a pattern of thought, speech, or action, the deeper that channel cuts, making it ever more likely that ignorance will choose that channel in order to flow to dukkha.

Saṅkhārā come in three categories. One relates to the mental formations of perception and feeling. We tend to see and feel the world in habitual ways. For example, we speak of people with a negative disposition, choosing fearful perceptions, detecting hostility in the most innocent remark. This all stems from a saṅkhāra of unpleasant feeling, perceptions of danger.

Others have an optimistic disposition, seeing the best in people and situations. Insofar as this is based on ignorance, what we're looking out for is worldly happiness. We see the best, not because of admiration or appreciation, but because we're used to feeding off the best that the world has to offer. When we walk into a party, we see the drinks counter, the food buffet, the most attractive people. A person with a negative disposition would have seen the messy, half-finished plates of food, heard insincerity in every peal of laughter. The deluded optimist usually manages to get the best out of situations, never noticing the mess they're leaving for others to clear up.

Then there are those who habitually choose neutral feelings and the perceptions of indifference which support neutrality.

When they walk into the room, they see neither the drinks cabinet nor the dirty plates. None of that matters very much. They might sidle into the first group that they encounter, accept whatever food and drink they're offered, play safe in conversation, quickly forgetting the names of whoever they're introduced to. The whole evening leaves only a vague impression on consciousness, makes little or no impact on their lives. Thus, the channel leading from ignorance to dukkha cuts a bit deeper, into the groove of neutrality and indifference.

You might recognise these crude portraits of optimism, pessimism, and indifference as the Buddhist description of the three personality types based on greed, hatred, or delusion. It's interesting to reflect that underlying the will which drives us along roots of greed, hatred, or delusion are habits of feelings and perception.

It gets a bit mysterious here, because sankhārās underlie consciousness and nāma-rūpa, implying that they exist outside the world of mind and matter. Sankhārās are bound up with another somewhat mysterious phenomenon in Buddhism: kamma. Kamma and sankhāra are usually illustrated by analogy to seeds and fruit. Whatever desire we choose to act upon sows a seed of kamma, which will later ripen as a fruit—a sankhāra—which prompts us to fulfill that desire again. While a seed and its fruit are directly linked in a material way, the link between our deeds and the sankhārās that result from them is immaterial. The Buddha warns us that the workings of kamma are beyond human understanding.

Ultimately, kamma and sankhāra lie in the realm of mystery, but one way to picture the link is to say that the doing of any deed results in a potential for its own repetition—a potential which underlies consciousness. We could use the analogy of a ghost. We are haunted by our past actions, speech, and thoughts.

But this isn't just a horror story. Many of these ghosts serve us well on the spiritual path. Thoughts, words, and deeds stemming from wisdom and mettā also want to impress themselves into consciousness and strengthen with each moment of mindfulness.

So far we've been looking at the sankhārā of mental habits—the ghostly image of feelings and perceptions we've developed through favouring certain feelings and perceptions. The optimist favouring pleasant feelings and happy perceptions, the pessimist favouring unpleasant feeling and fearful or hostile perceptions, and so on. Another variety of sankhāra concerns verbal formations: our habits not only of speech but of directed thought and evaluation.

Thoughts reflect how we conceive of the world. They rely on concepts, ideas. A baby doesn't think about what they're going to have for dinner. They just know when they're hungry and whether or not they like what's coming into their mouth. They live in immediate reality—sensations, feelings, impulses of wanting and not wanting, simple perceptions like blueness, warmth, ease, unease.

Gradually perceptions bundle together to reveal patterns. A lot of whiteness with some yellowness at one end turns into warm sweetness on the tongue and a filling of the belly. The concept of a feeding bottle starts to form as a very desirable pattern that is much more likely to happen if I cry loudly. And so we slowly learn how to manipulate the masses of sensory information that impinge on us each moment so as to get more of what makes us feel good and avoid what makes us feel bad.

To manipulate the world like this, we need concepts. We need to stand back from immediate experience and make sense of it. We take a multitude of passing sensations and weave them into a concept: feeding

bottle, mummy, blanket. As we grow older, the level of abstraction increases so that we can think about governments, human rights, Buddhism.

All of this mental activity happens when verbal sankhārās underlie consciousness. The ability to abstract, to conceptualize, allows us to make sense of our lives, choose a career, affect the world for good or evil, follow a spiritual path. We obviously don't want to destroy that ability. But we don't want to be enslaved by it either—unable to follow a single breath without spinning off into a stream of thought. We don't want to be forever haunted by the ghosts of our past thoughts, forever rehearsing what we'll say, repeating our opinions about this and that.

We counter this by sitting in meditation, again and again dropping the latest line of thought, choosing instead to let awareness dwell in that more immediate, non-conceptual reality of sensation and feeling. This is to strengthen the habitual formation in the third variety of sankhāra: bodily formations.

These are our physical habits—the way we walk, our facial expression, our nervous twitches. As we sit in meditation, the most predominant habit is the breath. Breathing forms the basis for biological life. When we stop breathing, we die. Of course, other functions like heartbeat are also essential, but the breath is the one under voluntary control. It's a habit we initiate at birth and continually repeat until death.

The Buddha places great emphasis on mindfulness of breathing. It's the first exercise in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. After a rains retreat, when a disciple asks him about his meditation, the Buddha responds that he spent most of the time being mindful of breathing. With three flavours of sankhāra to choose between—verbal formations, mental formations, and bodily formations—the Buddha chose the latter as the basis for consciousness during retreat.

The sankhārā of directed thought would have been unnecessary. He'd long since figured out the Dhamma. He didn't need to reflect on anything. The mental formation of pleasant feeling and perception would have allowed consciousness to establish itself in jhāna, a very restful state of deep concentration. We might think he would choose to spend his retreat in the freedom of nibbāna or one of those sublime states of jhāna.

But no—he deliberately chose to spend the months of the rains retreat being conscious of the in-breath and out-breath. Who knows why?

My guess is that it strengthened his will to live to the ripe old age of eighty. I like to think of him allowing the ghosts of his previous breaths to draw the infinite wisdom of Nibbana into his human form. I'm speculating here. All we know is that the Buddha places great emphasis on the use of this sankhara to build mindfulness of breathing, and that he chose to spend the months of the rains retreat doing this himself. So it's certainly a sankhara that can be used wisely, and perhaps—who knows—is a way to strengthen our life energy, our will to live.

The Buddha then asks what underlies sankhara, and answers that they are born and produced from

ignorance. It's only because we don't fully understand how suffering is caused that we let sankharas come out of potential and into consciousness. Ignorance is our basic problem. The Buddha never lists anything else—original sin or whatever—underlying ignorance.

We eradicate ignorance by gaining wisdom. We gain wisdom by experiencing reality directly, not through the filters of conceptual thought. Mindfulness educates us as to the true nature of the world. Each up-close, touchy-feely encounter with experience shows that craving is feeding dissatisfaction, dukkha. The deeper we let this truth sink in, the less we allow our sankhara ghosts to haunt us. We learn to hold off until an inkling of wisdom becomes conscious, cutting out new pathways for our speech, actions and thoughts—pathways that reflect the Dhamma, that take account of the fact that everything is in a constant process of creation and decay.

Having followed the Buddha's analysis of our problem down to its base in ignorance, let's recap. To undermine the delusion that Sati described so well—but which I think we all have to admit to—the Buddha first asks us to drop below the level of conceptual thought and see experience as a series of happenings, a dynamic sequence of events. Secondly, he wants us to see that events are being continually nourished by craving. Ultimately, everything we experience on this side of enlightenment has craving as its source.

The third thing he wants us to clarify is that things die away naturally once the supportive conditions are removed. This is good news. It means that we can put an end to our foolish craving. We don't have to tackle craving head on, stop ourselves desiring this or resisting that. Instead, we can find out what conditions allow craving to come about in the first place. As we undermine these, craving dies out quite naturally. That's the point of teaching us about the chain of conditions underlying craving. The better we get to know these, the more skilled we get at removing the supportive structure within us that binds us to suffering.

If you're looking for a very practical place to start, why not investigate the first point that the Buddha puts to his disciples? When the mind quietens in meditation, ask yourself whether your experience could be described by the phrase: *this has come to be*.

May our practice liberate us from craving and bring us to the end of suffering.

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